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Bye-bye baby bye-bye

As I obsessively play PixelJunk Monsters, splattering my morning-ritual breakfast oats on my PS3 controller as I attempt just one more victory pass before the drive to the office, it becomes even more clear that I'm so tired of scoring games. PixelJunk Monsters has insidiously taken over my free time right now, and I just thought you should know that, and know the arbitrary nature of that 9.0 bestowed upon its pint-sized greatness last month. Perhaps it is a 10, a perfect 10, even more perfect than Portal, which is also a 10 to the faithful, and could very well have been last year's highest achievement on a number of very important levels—maybe even the one and only game that should have landed the 10.

Maybe those cheaper games with small, intimate design teams should be in a different category, well outside the norm of the Call of Duty 4s and Halo 3s, whose massive stature demand a different scale, one that is beyond 10, into the 11s. (Referencing the many conspicuous ways all these games go wrong on plenty of levels can wait till later).

Yes, dear reader, I am tired of scoring games, as is the rest of the Play staff, so take this as a warning: next month you may not be seeing scores any longer. This will of course anger a good number of you, along with bringing joy to plenty of others, and so goes the way of the world. Hopefully more people will be happy than sad, but I guess we won't know till we try.

A report came out the other day, about cell phone addiction, and how a good number of people are beginning to show signs of panic attacks when their phone is out of range or dead and without a charger. Should we sometimes stop and wonder just how good all this growing technology is for our lives (or stop reading all these reports and news stories coming out that have little in the way of much validation, kind of like a game score)?

Nah... Sinking into the couch and escaping into these hypnotically believable gaming worlds nowadays is starting to become too good to resist any thoughts of technological bad stuff. 3D gaming is finally—finally!—something we can view as no longer entirely crude, yet talking about all this, a friend got me thinking the other day.

Is 2D back—at least back in force for people who care? I've gotten called a Luddite in the past, still believing in the value of 2D presentation, which I would consistently shrug off in the hopes that I knew I was right: something is lost while in the three-dimensional game spaces today, just as something amazing is gained as well. 2D is beautiful art; it defines a rigid, tangible structure of interaction within that art that should not be ignored.

What better to frame this aspect than the indie game movement, which is just getting started. I love it.

There's so much choice out there right now, and whether good or bad, we increasingly get it *our* way, and that's where modern technology really is grand. Now after you're done with this issue of Play, go see what *you* think of PixelJunk Monsters.

"Yes, dear reader, I am tired of scoring games, as is the rest of the Play staff, so take this as a warning..."

play magazine staff

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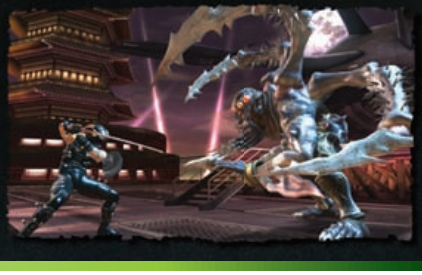

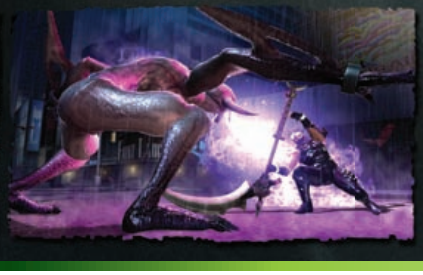

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May 2008

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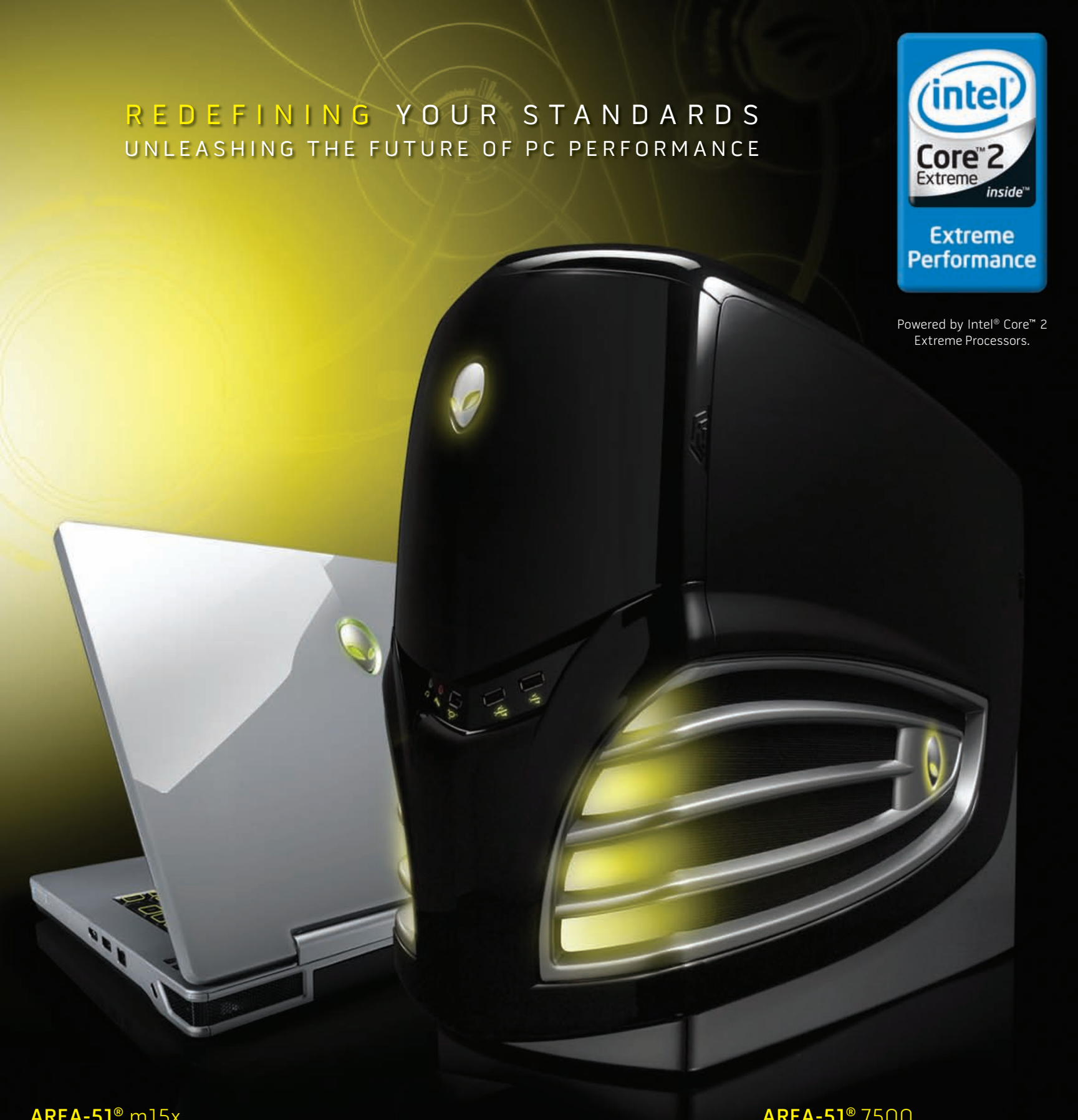

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DATABASE

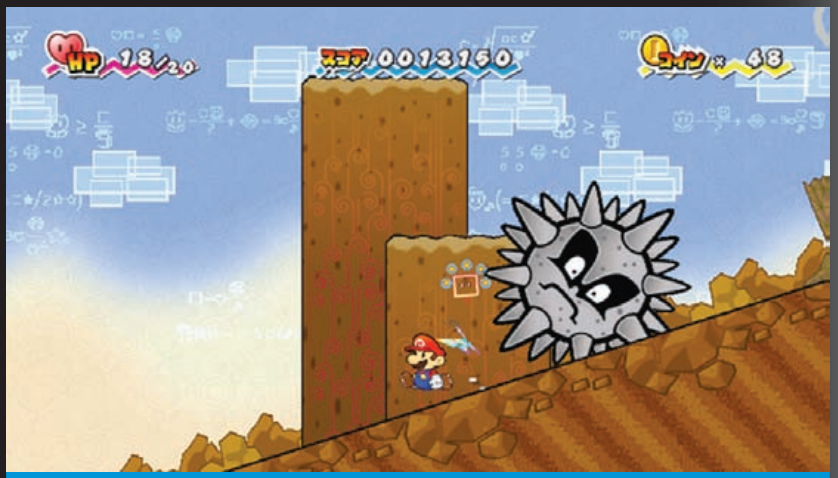
May **2008**

Here Wii go...

We all know how Nintendo titles dominate Wii software sales—next month's numbers will surely reflect Smash Bros. Brawl dominance—but we've been wondering how all those 3rd party Wii exclusives were fairing, the results of which range from promising (such as No More Heroes selling over 100k right out of the gate) to downright shocking. Dragon Quest Swords sold only 15,000 copies in its first week and One Piece Unlimited Adventure can't seem to get any traction even though it's an exceptional game. We also threw in Battalion Wars 2 since it's not Nintendo developed, and Super Paper Mario to see how 2D was fairing…hey now. If Konami doesn't have Iga working on a Wii exclusive 2D Castlevania they've got bats in their belfry.

Reflecting sales as of Feb. 29

01	Super Paper Mario NoA (Apr. 07)	944,000
02	Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles Capcom (Nov. 07)	325,000
03	No More Heroes Ubisoft (Jan. 08)	102,000
04	Bleach: Shattered Blade Sega (Oct. 07)	96,000
05	Zack and Wiki: Quest for Barbaro's Treasure Capcom (Oct. 07)	86,000
06	Nights Journey of Dreams Sega (Dec. 07)	85,000
07	Battalion Wars 2 NOA (Oct. 07)	74,000
08	Soul Calibur Legends Namco Bandai Games (Nov. 07)	64,000
09	Dragon Quest Swords Square Enix (Feb. 08)	15,000
10	One Piece Unlimited Adventure Namco Bandai Games (Jan. 08)	13,000



Super Paper Mario flexed its 2D muscle

No More Heroes: Over 100k in 3 weeks. And it's M rated!

One Piece: Hello...anybody out there?

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Happy bludgeoning on PC and Live

Happy tree Friends game available for download

Only in America could a show about cute cuddly little anthropomorphic animals that starts off like toddler vision before spiraling into wholesale violence, gore, and death end up on French, Dutch, German, Polish, Filipino, Brazilian, Lithuanian, Italian, British and Latin American MTV (and G4 of course where it all began, post exploding on the internet). Another fine gift to humanity from the USA. If you've never seen *Happy Tree Friends* mosey on over to happytreefriends.atomfilms.com and eliminate a few brain cells, then get right to downloading Sega's Xbox Live/PC game Happy Tree Friends: False Alarm—a side scrolling action puzzler that has Lumpy going through 10 all new disaster scenarios in an effort to save his "friends." And you thought Kenny had it bad?

Made in the West, animated in the East…

Geneon's parent company hits reset

When Geneon Entertainment bowed out of the anime business fans around the world started to worry for the first time. With ADV on the ropes, you could now count the number of healthy US anime companies on one hand of a blind butcher. All is not lost, however, as Dentsu (Geneon's parent company) has announced a new company (DCI) targeting the same age groups (boys 4-10 and 17-25 year-old males) with the primary strategy of setting up co-productions involving Western pre-production and then working with Dentsu's Tokyo TV division to finalize character design and produce animation in Japan. Their first title, *Deltora Quest*, for example, is based on the popular Scholastic Book series that's sold over 7 million copies in 31 Countries, but if you didn't know any better, it just looks like the latest new anime series. Deltora Quest does for 6-14 year-old boys what *Witchblade* is doing for the 16-and-up demographic. We already put in our order for a Gorillaz anime.

Video game RAWK!

Powerglove wants to rock you…

"The image of heavy metal is dominated by sadness and anger. While many fans relate to these feelings, much of the metal fanbase desires fun, catchy music played with the energy and virtuosity of metal, but without the negative emotions. For these people, there is Powerglove: a band that reinterprets well known and nostalgic videogame themes with an upbeat, heavy metal flair." In other words you can now sooth your metal urges to the tune of "Sexy Robotnik" or "Mario Minor," two of the tracks on Powerglove's new CD, *Metal Kombat for the Mortal Man*, available at http://www.myspace.com/vgmetal, along with tour dates and anything else you could possibly want to know about gaming's one and only metal act.

Keep your Eye on the maul

Sony has their Eye on you

As promised Sony and Hasbro continue to build on the Eye of Judgment phenomenon as more and more PS3 users join the fraternity of gamers hooked on the world's first virtual card battle system. In addition to new Wood Swarm, Biolith Scourge, Fire Crusader, Water barrage, and Earth Emperor decks, The Eye of Judgment: Biolith Rebellion 2 (set 2) was released on March 27 and is now available from the Playstation Store. Now you can combine the 110 cards available from set 1 with 100 new spells, creatures, animations, and rules available with set 2. The expansion also includes an enhanced HUD, and all new deck-based strategies incorporating more card combos and defense against opposing attacks, via the library, graveyard, and cards in hand. A great game just keeps getting better.

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Sonic the Hedgehog UNLEASHED

Sonic Team hits the reset button

words Dave Halverson

A funny thing happened on our way to the exclusive US Sonic Unleashed reveal. Just days before putting the cover story to bed the assets were leaked all over the internet. Two months of planning, travel, and negotiating between Sega US, UK, and Japan all went swirling down the drain. We had to make a quick decision: do we go to plan B and downgrade our cover to a feature? Or do we stay the course and work with Sega to pull it out, the result of which is quite obvious. And so while some of you may have seen a few of the images spread over these pages—although Sonic Team was kind enough to give us an additional level in the aftermath—what really counts are the exclusive interviews that reveal exactly what Sonic Unleashed means to the fans and the franchise. I mean, let's face it, while the Sonic faithful have been able to look beyond the caveats that have persisted since its exciting 3D debut on Dreamcast, the world is still waiting for Sonic to reclaim his place beside Mario (outside of an Olympic stadium). Since that fateful moment in videogame history when Sonic helped propel Sega past Nintendo's previously presumed impentrable video game dynasty, there's never been a mediocre Mario game. The same cannot be said for Sonic. There have definitely been some great games along the way, but we still haven't seen that quintessential 3D Sonic. Be that as it may, there are few things in the entertainment kingdom as inspiring as a great Sonic level. When one of those euphoric Sonic tunes comes together with the perfect storm of speed, flow, and agility, it still makes my heart skip a beat. Between unforgivably long load times and an extraneous overworld hub, Sonic the Hedgehog on Xbox 360 (let's just pretend the PS3 version never happened) delivered many such moments, while

"Anyone who got into gaming post-PlayStation has no idea how awesome 2D can be, especially pumped through today's technology and visionary designers..."

introducing Silver, the series' most exciting new character since Shadow. Due to Sega's strict deadline credo, however, and Sonic Team's penchant for trying to squeeze three years worth of development into two, like every 3D Sonic game before it, Sonic Team reached the point where they had to button it up and get it out the door before they could completely fine tune what amounted to a massive scale game…

That was then…

Presented with the opportunity to reveal Sonic Unleashed back in January before there was a single screen to ogle, all I knew was that it was being developed by Sonic Team for 360 and PS3 with Yoshihisa Hashimoto taking over lead design duties, which bodes well for two reasons: Working his way up from Lead Chao Programmer on Sonic Adventure, he knows his Sonic and, given Sonic the Hedgehog's reception, if there was ever going to be series reset, this had to be it. Of course I also always have it in the back of my mind that sooner or later somebody at Sonic Team is going to realize that side scrolling isn't a four letter word. Not that I'm looking for a dusty old 2D Sonic revival, however, I do think that integrating side scrolling into the formula is paramount in reclaiming the renown Sonic earned as a 2D game. Side scrolling gameplay on console has been gone long enough that its reintroduction could easily be considered innovative. Anyone who got into gaming post-PlayStation has no idea how awesome 2D can be, especially pumped through today's technology and visionary designers... I know, I know; I've been saying this for so long that even I was getting sick of hearing it.

This is now...

Sonic the Hedgehog Unleashed preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, Wii
Developer	Sonic Team
Publisher	Sega
Available	Holiday 2008

An interview with Yoshihisa Hashimoto, Lead Director, Designer and Technical Director for Sonic the Hedgehog Unleashed

Interview

with Yoshihisa Hashimoto, Lead Director, Designer and Technical Director for Sonic the Hedgehog Unleashed

play: Little Sonic has come a long, long way since he lead the charge against Nintendo in the 16-bit wars, but I still feel like I haven't played the definitive 3D Sonic. Now that you've had time with the 360 and PS3, is this the one? Is this the game that every Sonic fan has been praying for?
Yes, I think this will be the game Sonic fans have been waiting for. Sonic will be reborn in the state he always should have existed in with a new control scheme, fresh new gameplay elements, all while simultaneously returning to Sonic's roots.

Our goal has been to polish and bring to the fore the most attractive elements of classic Sonic gameplay, while also adding something completely new. The whole development team is aiming to make Sonic Unleashed the best Sonic game ever, and that includes the Genesis-era titles!
We hope that even people who haven't played Sonic games will feel "Wow, Sonic is back!" and maybe even be motivated to buy a next-gen game console if they've been sitting on the fence.

So Sonic is under new management?
Sonic Unleashed comprises a new direction for us. The core development team is completely different. Akinori Nishiyama is the Producer, Sachiko Kawamura is the Art Director, and I'm wearing several hats including Director, Game Designer, and Technical Director. We lead a group of young, talented, and passionate developers, and we are all in the midst of creating a wonderful adventure for Sonic.

Wow. So this is a completely new team! Tell us more.
Development is being carried out by Sonic Team in Japan, just as previous titles in the Sonic series were. But the core team in charge of design is a completely new team—different from the core teams on past Sonic titles, including Sonic Adventure, Sonic Heroes, Sonic and the Secret Rings, and Sonic The Hedgehog PS3/360. There are other significant differences from past Sonic titles, including the development environment, the development methodology, the approach to game design, and the project management. This means you can expect a lot of differences in this team's Sonic title from past Sonic titles, particularly in the areas of overall look and feel and quality. Of course, I believe it will be change for the better. We currently have over 100 developers, many of them young, gifted, and passionate about their work. The team also includes many developers who have worked on renowned titles for other companies; you'd be surprised if you saw a list. Everyone on the team loves Sonic and is working night and day, fully committed to making an amazing game. We understand the problem areas of past Sonic games as well as the issues in the development process in the past, and we are working to overcome them.

But while the development is taking place in Japan, we are constantly working very closely with the SOA and SOE producers and marketing teams. So it's also very much a worldwide effort by a global team. I'm confident this new team will enable us deliver a top quality Sonic The Hedgehog game!

I've been praying for more traditional side scrolling Sonic gameplay within a 3D framework since Sonic went 3D on Dreamcast. So this it: the wait is over? Am I dreaming?
Sonic Unleashed stages consist of both traditional 3D gameplay (forward view) and side-scrolling gameplay in a 3D environment (side view). Transitions between the two styles of gameplay occur seamlessly, and the ratio of 3D to 2D play

is about half and half. We could have made a Sonic game that consists entirely of side-scrolling gameplay, but we believed there was a better solution. And I'm proud to say our idea worked, which was to incorporate and balance both 3D and 2D gameplay styles into a completely new super speed experience.

We understand Sonic fans truly love classic side scrolling Sonic gameplay. Sonic Unleashed should be the Sonic game that finally fills that void.

Also, I want to emphasize that the 3D gameplay won't be on rails like Sonic and the Secret Rings (Wii). You'll be able to wander freely about the environment if you wish. ***[-I've waited over 10 years for someone to say those words! See kids—never give up!]***

I noticed some vertical elements too. Is Unleashed the most original new Sonic game since Sonic Adventure?
We went back to the drawing board for Sonic Unleashed from its beginnings in the conceptual stage. This is a completely different approach than we took from Sonic the Hedgehog (360/PS3) and Sonic and the Secret Rings.

But there is a secret about the origins of the project I can share with you. It was originally started with the goal of making Sonic Adventure 3. Many years ago all the core development team members including myself worked on the Sonic Adventure titles in some manner. Since that time we have been thinking about the best way to bring out the best in Sonic and incubating ideas

in our minds. We're now making those ideas a reality. So in other words, we are finally *unleashing* our own vision.

After a long development process, we're announcing our title and concept to the world under the banner of Sonic Unleashed, but spirit was forged in the Sonic Adventure series. The world and setting of Sonic Unleashed also draws inspiration from the Sonic Adventure series.

But on the other hand, the play style of Sonic Unleashed differs from Sonic Adventure in many ways, so it's truly a new and original Sonic The Hedgehog title.

So where does Unleashed fall in the lineage?
The story of Sonic Unleashed is unrelated to the story told in Sonic the Hedgehog (360/PS3).

> "We could have made a Sonic game that consists entirely of side scrolling gameplay, but we believed there was a better solution. And I'm proud to say our idea worked..."
>
> - Yoshihisa Hashimoto

Sonic Unleashed is a completely new game with an entirely new storyline and unrelated to Sonic The Hedgehog (360/PS3).

Sonic is a character with lots of history of which we're very proud of. This game gives us an opportunity to help pave the way for the future. The design team feels like we are creating an entirely new game, and the process we're following is like that for an entirely new game.

Loading seemed to be an issue with the last game. I suppose that's being addressed...
Yes, in Sonic The Hedgehog (PS3/360) the loading times were frequent and very long. We know that caused a lot of irritation to gamers who played it. Sonic Unleashed has been designed to minimize the requirements for loading, so hopefully that will minimize the stress people felt dealing with that problem.

Speaking of the last game aside from the loading and a few hitches in the gameplay I really liked it, although it did seem like you had to rush it at the end. Will Unleashed be fully polished before it hits the street?
Very few development teams are able to freely dictate the terms of the schedules they operate under—only a limited number of teams in very special circumstances can do so. That said, we've made improvements to our development environment, our development process, and our quality management, and are working

hard to make sure we have as much time to polish the game as possible.

Have you considered a remix of Sonic the Hedgehog (360) leaving out the town and overworld stages and just going straight level to level action? I bet a lot of people that didn't stick with it would be shocked at what an amazing game they missed… At $29.99 I bet it would sell like mad.
Just including action stages in a budget title that gamers can just pick up and play is certainly not a bad idea. If compelling levels with enough volume of gameplay were included, such a title might succeed.

Last time out you introduced Silver—in my opinion the best new arrival since Shadow. Are you introducing any additional new characters in Unleashed?
No, Silver won't make an appearance in this game. Part of the enjoyment of developing a Sonic game is to challenge ourselves to come up with fresh and innovative characters as well as ways to develop existing characters. So, I can't reveal too much at this point in terms of new characters but I can promise that Sonic Unleashed will provide gamers something new and exciting, and in doing so will challenge and extend Sonic and his world in ways never before seen.

So will the game star Sonic going through an entire solo game, or is this more like the last game where you unlock and complete several scenarios featuring various characters from the Sonic universe?
The game and story completely revolve around Sonic and his travels around his world in a big adventure. The storyline is unexpected and will offer an interesting twist which will affect things. I can't really say anymore beyond that as of now.

Is Eggman/Robotnik still the resident evil villain? Maybe he has an evil daughter… he's getting up there
It's the classic relationship… a good hero needs a great enemy. We think Dr. Eggman has always been a good balance to Sonic! Not only does Dr. Eggman appear in Sonic Unleashed, but you will see him commit a heinous act worse than anything he's ever done before. Yet soon afterwards, a being that he fears more than anything else in the universe makes its awesome presence known: his mother. Just joking about the mom part!

In StH you also slowed things down with levels like Tropical Jungle which I really liked. Are you introducing any similar more platforming based level designs?
Yes, we will be introducing some slower-paced platforming-based levels. I think one of the best qualities of Sonic Unleashed is the different styles of gameplay it allows for while maintaining consistency as an overall experience.

Will you be utilizing the town area as a hub again? If so how has it been improved upon?
Yes, in Sonic Unleashed there are areas that can be called towns that act has hubs for the action stages. The story is advanced by speaking with the townspeople in the towns. However, we are not losing sight of the fact that this is an action game and the towns should not interfere with the tempo of the game, but rather add color and background to Sonic's adventures.

What about new moves? Are they available for purchase like last time as the game unfolds or are they preset? Have there been many additions to Sonic's repertoire?
The new moves are added to Sonic's repertoire by finding items in the stages. There are lots of new moves such as Quick Step, Sonic Drift, Stomping, and Wall Jumping.

How are you handling the cinematics? In engine or via cut scenes?
We're actually doing both, and both types of cinematics will have stunning visuals.

Should we expect more in-game story then in the past, or more of a focus on straight action?
Our aim is not to tell any more story than is necessary in order that players can focus on the action at the core of the game. But of course that doesn't mean there's no story at all. The story helps to set the stage for this game. We've done our best to carefully balance the amount of story, and to integrate it well with the overall game. For example, once a player has cleared an action stage, they will be able to use an intuitive interface to

A birds-eye view of one of Sonic's open world stomping grounds.

"Many years ago all the core development team members including myself worked on the Sonic Adventure titles in some manner. Since that time we have been thinking about the best way to bring out the best in Sonic and incubating ideas in our minds." - Yoshihisa Hashimoto

directly jump into the action stages and replay them as many times as they want, without jumping through any hoops such as talking to townspeople.

So is the structure true to the series norm or is Unleashed more one long continuous adventure?
At this point there are still some things we can't talk about, but the structure is different from any other Sonic title. It will be an entirely new type of Sonic game.

We were told originally that the game was a being created for 360 and PS3 only but now we've learned of a Wii version. Since the Wii doesn't have pixel shaders how different will it look?
On the PS3/360, we're using the Hedgehog Engine which has been in development for three years. It's a proprietary engine we developed internally for high end platforms, and it makes the game visuals beautiful and larger than life. For the Wii version, talented developers are working hard at replicating those beautiful visuals as much as possible.

How will you handle the environments given the Wii's limited memory? Will you segment the levels?
Some of the stages exceed six miles in length because Sonic runs so incredibly fast. While the memory sizes of all the first party platforms have increased significantly, there's no way that much data can be held simultaneously in any of them, not just the Wii.
We stay within the memory limitations of all platforms by using data streaming to allow Sonic to run through those massive levels.

You seem to shy away from normal mapping. Is this purely a design choice to retain a certain look?
We are utilizing normal mapping on surfaces. But it just so happens that the scenes you saw don't make heavy use of that technique, so it may appear at first glance that it's not being used at all. Where it's necessary and it works well, we will fully utilize normal mapping, but where it's not completely necessary we are purposely using it in moderation.

For a while platformers and fantasy games in general seemed in peril, however, we're witnessing a huge resurgence here in the US with the advent of so many new gamers. Has this reinvigorated you as a studio to reignite the genre like you did back when Sonic was introduced? Can we look upon this as a rebirth of sorts?
Well one thing I can say is that both Sonic fans and people who have never played a Sonic game before won't feel they are covering the same old ground. Our hope is that people will find Sonic Unleashed to be

The Hedgehog Engine comes to life.

an original and fun experience.

We've seen very little of what I'm sure is a massive game. Are you saving anything big to reveal around E3?
There's still quite a bit we can't discuss, but we'll be slowly revealing information, and we have some big surprises in store!

Sonic has also given us some of the most memorable soundtracks. Are you utilizing the same composer? Are there any innovations taking place regarding the sound design?
Our Sound Director is Tomoya Ohtani. He contributed to the sound on Sonic Rush, and is a young and talented designer. Sonic Unleashed uses all kinds of sound techniques. For example, when engaging Sonic Boost the music changes, and when Sonic runs close by an object the sound effects are really cool. I still can't talk about the details, but the direction of the music is also designed along certain key themes of the game, all of which will become clear in time.

"On the PS3/360, we're using the Hedgehog Engine which has been in development for three years. It's a proprietary engine we developed internally for high end platforms, and it makes the game visuals beautiful and larger than life." -Yoshihisa Hashimoto

More than anything else Sonic games make us feel happy. They combine instant gratification with beautiful landscapes and one-of-a-kind characters. Is that "feeling" a big part of what drives Sonic team development?
Sonic The Hedgehog has extraordinarily distinctive characteristics as an action game character not seen in any other videogame characters in the world. This makes developing a Sonic game a unique challenge. All the developers on Sonic Team work hard day in and day out, but when we see Sonic looking cool using his phenomenal abilities and blazing through some of the complex levels we've put together, it's an amazing feeling! All that hard work is suddenly worth it.

When you set out to develop each new game in the series you have two very loyal fan bases to consider: fans that have been by Sonic's side since the beginning (like myself), and younger gamers, both of which are experienced gamers. But there's a third group now of new gamers who have just bought a next gen console or Wii. Has gaming's broader demographic changed the way you approach game design?
We definitely want as many people as possible to play and enjoy the game, but I have not made any changes or compromises to my personal theory of game design. If something is fun at the core, and if that core experience is accessible to anyone then people will enjoy it, whether they are casual gamers or hardcore gamers, loyal Sonic fans or people who have never heard of Sonic.

Today's gamers also tend to look for games with an edge… not too "cute." The world has changed a lot since Sonic's first foray in the Green Hill Zone. Do you take into account the cool factor it takes to peak an American's interest?
Yes, we definitely want Sonic to be seen as cool, and we're constantly thinking of ways to make that an integral and natural part of the character and game. But if people just want a cool character there are lots of others to choose from. So as we work on the game, we're always trying to find a way that Sonic can be cool in a unique way that is only his.

Where's Yuji Naka these days? Since he started working on Prope has he stayed in touch?
I hear he's doing really well. He's so talented that I'm confident we'll see some wildly creative games from him that will once again captivate audiences worldwide. I can't wait to play them myself.

Getting Sonic and Mario together in a sports game was hugely successful and now Sonic is in Super Smash Bros. Brawl. How long before we see these two in their own buddy action game!?
It was really an amazing thing to see. We have a huge amount of respect for Nintendo and we were ecstatic to see our beloved Sonic appear together with Mario. There will likely be further chances for Sonic and Mario to appear together as long as gamers keep demanding it, and we'd be very happy if someday Mario is able to make an appearance in a game that we work on.

Now comes the tough part: waiting!
Rest assured that we will bring you an amazing Sonic the Hedgehog game, a Sonic game that won't betray everyone's expectations. Look for Sonic Unleashed in holiday 2008.

Thank you so much for your time and for keeping our beloved Sega mascot alive and well.
You're welcome, thanks for having me!

More on Unleashed with Sega of America Producer Patrick Riley

It wasn't so long ago that Japan was the Hollywood of game design, but the tables have turned in recent years, as gaming has become a fixture in entertainment culture. Not to say that Japan doesn't still dominate in certain areas and command a sizeable audience, but the US market is where games are made or broken. Has this prompted Sonic Team to take things in a slightly

"...the Wii development team is likewise focused on wringing every drop of power from the Wii architecture. The Wii controls will obviously be different, as well as the design of the stages..." –Patrick Riley

new direction?
The shifting market in itself hasn't changed Sonic Team's focus. Sonic games are more successful in the US and Europe than they are in Japan, and that's been the case for a long while. So unlike other Japanese developers, Sonic Team's priorities have always been US and European markets first, and the Japanese market second. However, Japanese developers in general are paying a lot more attention to the top titles developed in the US and Europe. They're playing and studying high-quality titles which do well in the West, even if they aren't commercially successful in Japan. It's completely different from when I was living in Japan in the '90s and everyone put down *yougei* (Western games)! Sonic Team isn't an exception to this trend. When you walk around their offices you're probably more likely to see Western titles on people's shelves or being played on breaks. And in conversations with Hashimoto-san about design, he talks much more about Western titles as his recent influences rather than Japanese titles.

As celebrated as Sonic's 3D outings have been, they've always exhibited a certain lack of polish that fans have (reluctantly) almost come to accept...exceedingly long and frequent load times, falling off the world, wacky collision and so forth. It's presumed that this is due to Sonic Team trying to squeeze three years worth of content into two-year development cycles, which is admirable. Are they aware of how picky US audiences become though? Might Unleashed be the first truly polished 3D Sonic?

Sonic Team is very aware of the expectations and areas in which where there is room for improvement. All of the issues you mention were discussed early in the design of the game and the Hedgehog engine. It would be a mistake to wait until the final stages and try to fix it all in tuning. To take an example, Sonic Team has had the falling off the world issue in mind since the beginning and the architecture of the stages takes that problem into account.

Did Sega of America participate in the conception of Unleashed, or is SoA's primary function localization?
The concept of Sonic Unleashed came from Hashimoto-san and his team in Japan. But Sega of America and Sega of Europe are much more involved in providing feedback to the team than has been the case for past titles. I've personally been in Japan meeting with the team twice in the past 10 weeks, and everyone in all three territories is very, very invested in making sure this is a great game.

Would you say that Unleashed is less about speed and more about precision platforming, or a mixture of both?
It's definitely a mixture of both, but we're not mixing them willy-nilly. There are specific stages and areas built around speed, and some built around precision platforming. But the people who are most interested in speed will definitely be pleased. You really have to experience it yourself, but when engaging one of the new speed modes, "Sonic Boost", you feel like you're running dangerously fast and are always on the edge of losing control.

I know you can't say exactly which characters we'll see but can you hint as to whether or not Unleashed changes gears as much as recent sequels? Do you think we'll ever see another pure Sonic game?
We believe that Sonic Unleashed is going to be a game that fans will really enjoy. It is a reinvention of Sonic as the game will unveil new next gen abilities but also offers elements of what made Sonic such a beloved franchise starting with the 2D transitions. Moreover, Sonic Unleashed will have a twist which allows us to explore new options for gameplay and new directions for Sonic. Stay tuned! We are confident that people looking for a pure Sonic experience will not be disappointed. It will be delivered in spades.

I was shocked to hear of a Wii version. Seeing as how the 360 is the lead platform do you think it's fair to shoehorn a thoroughbred 360/PS3 game onto Wii? Either you're limiting the scope of your 360/PS3 design or being forced to drastically downgrade your visuals and segment your levels on Wii. Is Sonic Team doing the Wii game and if so, how are they dealing with the memory constraints and absence of pixel shaders?
That's an excellent question! We had the same concerns when we were originally considering how best to structure the project. And our solution was to split the development into two separate development teams and silos. The 360/PS3 team is focused on creating an experience that takes full advantage of the capabilities of those consoles without making any compromises.
On the other hand, the Wii development team is likewise focused on wringing every drop of power from the Wii architecture. The Wii controls will obviously be different, as well as the design of the stages, which are being designed completely separately on the Wii. So real fans of the title that have a Wii and a PS3 or 360 might even want to consider buying both since the stages will be quite different.
The 360/PS3 is completely an internal effort. Sonic Team is managing the Wii development, but the coding and some design is being handled by some of our external partners in Japan. Fans of Sonic Rush and Sonic Rush Adventure will be pleased to hear that Dimps is involved with designing the Wii stages!

Based on what I've seen of Unleashed (on 360) it seems like a rebirth along the lines of the transition to Sonic Adventure. You're right there in the thick of it…is it? Are we entering phase 3?
Calling it a rebirth is a nice way to describe how we've approached and managed this game. It definitely feels special. We attribute a lot to the new team leaders in Hashimoto-san and Kawamura-san, as both have a huge amount of passion and a strong vision for how to breathe new life into classic Sonic gameplay. A new engine built for next-gen consoles and a new era in working together as a global company to make Sonic Unleashed the best it can be. Yes, I think it's fair to say we're entering a new phase.

Is there a lot of dialogue in Unleashed? And if so, is the voice being recorded here? Sonic's had some pretty wonky English in the past. Do you have our backs?
All your dialogue are belong to us! There is a fair amount of dialogue in the game. We spent three days in New York City in December recording the main storyline and will spend some more time in the studio around May or June doing pickups. The dialogue has been through rewrites and checks by professional writers. I promise to continue to put my ten years of experience in game localization to work to stomp out Engrish!

Hah! Good one! Do you work in synch with Sonic Team so that you're always on the same page, looking at the same build, or do they send you milestones and then wait for feedback?
The development team is prototyping the levels, enemies, and gameplay by renewing the build on a daily basis in Japan. That's a good thing as they can see immediately if their changes are working, but it means it's impossible to stay on top of every minor change from offsite.
However, at the same time we receive several builds a month, so I also wouldn't characterize it as only giving feedback at major milestones. It also helps that myself and a few other key team members at Sega of America speak Japanese fluently, so we can read mails, documentation, status updates and the like without waiting for

"Hashimoto-san and Sonic Team are not only redefining 3D and classic side-scrolling Sonic gameplay, they're also adding new elements which will knock people's socks off…" –Patrick Riley

them to be translated, and can jump on the phone if we have a burning question.

As a Producer on the front lines of Sega's most beloved franchise how would you say Sega views Sonic at this juncture? On the one hand you have millions of gamers who grew up on Sonic, many of which still come out for every sequel. Then you have the kids. Sonic being a talking bipedal blue hedgehog certainly makes him kid friendly, but most kids follow trends like Naruto, or games based on current cartoons or movies. In between you have teenagers, most of which are counting the days to GTA IV and wouldn't be caught dead playing Sonic. So why does Sega market Sonic almost exclusively to kids? Does the same apply in Japan? Does Sega take Sonic's loyal following into consideration?
SEGA is constantly trying to evolve and deliver on new concepts for Sonic. He is our number one priority, and no doubt our flagship property. With over 50 million units sold, Sonic is indeed an icon that is well-loved by individuals of all ages. With DVDs, two animated TV series, comic books, and an animated movie, Sonic is still in the forefront of kids, as well as the older Sonic fan. SEGA definitely appreciates and values Sonic's loyal following, and we're equally excited by the fact that we seem to be always amassing new fans. It's clear that Sonic is a property people love, which is genuinely humbling. With *Sonic Unleashed*, we are aiming to deliver what fans have been waiting for by taking Sonic in a new direction, yet staying true to his roots, not only are we *unleashing* the power and speed that can only be his, but we're allowing the fans to play Sonic like never before and create an all-new rich & deeper experience.

Sum up this game and what it means to this franchise…are we in for something special? Is this the one?
Hashimoto-san and Sonic Team are not only redefining 3D and classic side-scrolling Sonic gameplay, they're also adding new elements which will knock people's socks off, and which will allow them to introduce precision platforming and combat in a way that feels organic to the Sonic world. The game is in good hands. Hashimoto-san is incredibly smart, has great design instincts, demands quality, and has a strong vision of how to grow and improve Sonic. Happily, his vision is inclusive of many of the things fans have been crying out for.

You had me at Hedgehog Engine.

Mario Kart Wii

Weeeeeeeeeee!!!!

words Brady Fiecther

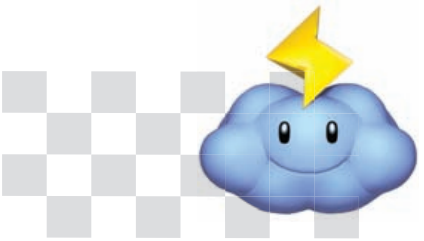
Friends may be lost playing Mario Kart Wii. I think I lost a dear friend of mine after sending him a scathing text message: "you are stupid, Mario Kart Wii is stupid, and I don't keep friendships with stupid filthy cheaters."

My ex-friend is not the only one who cheats in the dastardly chaotic Mario Kart Wii. There is always someone on the track—curse you Donkey Kong and your fat ass cart knocking me into the ether!—who seems to find the red shell of death at the most inopportune moment, or—as any true Mario Kart fan will know so well—a blue shell that seeks out the first-place opponent and supplies immediate removal from the joys of imminent victory.

Some things never change, and for the most part, Mario Kart Wii could be the direct sequel to Mario Kart 64 from a decade earlier. Forget about Mario Kart on GameCube, because this is a return to the infuriating, wonderful, outrageously fun days of Mario Kart at its best.

The version of Mario Kart Wii I dug into lacked an online component, but I can imagine the benefit of upping the kart count we're used to from eight to 12, and as it plays out offline, the manic unpredictability the series is known for seems as unpredictable as ever, shells flying all over the place, banana peels littering the courses, racers aggressively vying for position, vile profanity delightfully in tow as the game delivers one wild scenario after another. Mario Kart Wii is better than ever at asking you to manage the courses with actual driving aplomb, and while that cheapness is in full force, there is a balance waged that makes the series feel even more satisfying as a game of focus. An increased emphasis on speed—boost opportunities are omnipresent—takes the mechanics to even more frantic heights. Instead of relying on the triple-boost powerslide assistance, Mario Kart Wii has factored in trick boosts activated from yanking the Wiimote back off a jump. You start to string together what amounts to combo turbo charges, which can be as useful as unleashing the fury of powerups

"I think I lost a dear friend of mine after sending him a scathing text message: 'you are stupid, Mario Kart Wii is stupid, and I don't keep friendships with stupid filthy cheaters.'"



all-important Mario Kart-edge.

Bikes have been introduced as well, which after a while I simply couldn't stop using. Popping a wheelie ups the speed on straightaways, taking a little control away from the ride while you prepare for the next hazardous corner. The nimble feel is a good change, even if the substantial driving mechanic is pretty much the same as the karts in the end. There's just something infectiously humorous about Bowser entering a half-pipe on a bike, pulling off stunts as he gets increasingly higher air.

The game looks great, just what you'd expect from the Wii, and while there are moments when you might wish a little more sophistication was layered in, Nintendo reveals its masterful ways by contrasting stretches of little wonders in the track designs and visual presentation. The improved animations are appreciated and enjoyed the more you travel up the speed classes; the added complexities to the vehicle and character aesthetic make the feel of the game substantialy more satisfying than what you're used to experiencing with the series. There seems to be a little more physical connection to the carts, which makes up for what is awfully familiar Mario Karting in the grander scheme.

There will no doubt be newcomers, but this is a game for those who have loved the series from the beginning, the 16 restructured classic tracks almost as enjoyable as the 16 new ones. My ex-friend and I constantly laughed at how often we proclaimed, over and over again, "Oh man, seriously, this is a great one, has to be my favorite track for sure." If I had to play favorites, I'd say Mario Kart 64 has just been knocked off the pedestal.

"The nimble feel is a good change, even if the substantial driving mechanic is pretty much the same as the karts in the end."

Mario Kart Wii preview

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Nintendo
Publisher	Nintendo
Available	April

Friend or foe? We didn't get to try the bundled Wii wheel, but it should be wacky!

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Street Fighter IV

Ultimate fighting champions

words Heather Campbell

For those of you who've been playing games for the last fifteen years, the sudden announcement and release of Street Fighter IV must come as a shock. I recall a time when gamers joked, "Capcom can't count to three," as a full six years passed between Street Fighter II and III. During that time, Capcom developed the Alpha/Zero series, as well as the Vs. series…but Street Fighter III was no where to be seen. After III's release (and lukewarm reception among casual fans), we all figured, "Well…that's that. No more Street Fighter games."

Furthermore, since the final release of SFIII in 1999, the American arcade scene has completely died out. Even tournament-heavy states like California have watched the arcades shut down and disappear. Things don't look much better in Tokyo; shooters and beat-em-ups have been replaced with UFO Catchers and Camera Booths.

Fighting games? Well, it wouldn't be much of an overstatement to say fighting games died with the arcade. We've got Tekken, we've got Dead or Alive. And we've got Smash Brothers. But competition junkies in the states get their fix with first-person-shooters. See, a fighting game requires an extremely precise grasp of timing, and the versus scene has become virtual. Online connections don't allow for pixel-perfect parries, so there hasn't been much room for fighting games on Live or the PSN.

> "Even tournament-heavy states like California have watched the arcades shut down and disappear."

Street Fighter IV is going to be online when it comes home, but for right now it lives and dies in arcades in Japan. The character roster includes returning fighters Balrog, Blanka, Chun-Li, Dhalsim, E. Honda, Guile, Ken, Ryu, Sagat and Zangief (producer Yoshinori Ono has expressed the desire to include every Street Fighter 2 character), and new characters so far announced are Abel, C. Viper, and El Fuerte. Abel and El Fuerte are grapplers, and C. Viper is a flashy projectile fighter that feels a little too SNK.

Fans of SFIII will be disappointed to hear that the parry system is gone…but at least dashing and throwing remain. Supers return, too. But the big change is the Saving system, which is based around a Revenge gauge that fills as the character takes damage. By pressing medium punch and kick, characters use portions of the gauge like the mini-supers of 3, but apparently the feel of the system is closer to the delay-release of Alpha counters. General combat draws heavily from Street Fighter II as well; the game is very aggressive, with few combos.

With so much of the game rooted in Street Fighter II, it will be interesting to watch the developers stretch their legs and give IV a real flavor of its own. So far, the nostalgia trumps the ingenuity, but we have faith that Capcom's not going to pull any punches when it comes to a numbered series release. If your city has an arcade, get out there and bug them for a unit. The 1080p, sit-down cabinet may look out of place among the Time Crisis machines, but if anything is going to awaken the American arcade scene again, it's going to be a Street Fighter.

Street Fighter IV preview

System(s)	PS3, 360, Arcade
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	Q4, 2008

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Alone in the Dark

In the dark, in the park

words Greg Orlando

Edward Carnby is never really alone in the dark. Not when he has so many walking terrors to keep him company.

Alone in the Dark, as a franchise, has survived hack director Uwe Boll. As the German philosopher F.W. Nietzsche suggested, this can only have made the franchise stronger.

Now, it is time for the franchise to move past Boll's terrible, incomprehensible Alone in the Dark film and make its own foray into narrative storytelling. This new, third-person perspective Dark features a chapter-based story that has the paranormal detective Carnby uncovering a great and oftentimes disgusting evil in New York's Central Park. This episodic division of Dark is taking its marching orders from TV shows such as *24*, with each chapter containing its own twists and, of course, cliffhangers. The rather novel presentation of the game allows players to fast-forward to any episode they choose; it may be cheating, but Atari wants players to see this game's conclusion.

"The true star of the game, however, is New York's Central Park."

Carnby has survived four previous Alone in the Dark adventures. This new game will explain how Carnby, a hero who was young in the 1920s (as shown in the original Alone in the Dark) is still alive and kicking in this new, modern-day adventure. This time around, Carnby will be a more rough-and-tumble character; introductory sequences have him rappelling down an elevator shaft, using his body to push obstacles —in this case a live electrical wire—out of the way, escaping from an inferno, and jumping over chasms to get to safety. In addition, Carnby will also be able to take common items and combine them to make a variety of tools and weapons. A bottle, rag, lighter, and alcohol can be used to create a Molotov cocktail. An aerosol can and lighter can be combined to make a flamethrower. When it comes time to batter a door down, a fire extinguisher works well as a bludgeon; players simply flick, say, the Xbox 360 controller's analog stick up and down to simulate a swinging motion to smash the door.

The true star of the game, however, is New York's Central Park. The real-world version is slightly imposing during the day and, thanks to a fervent police presence, relatively peaceful at night. In the game, Central Park is a nightmare, choked with shadows and plagued by a persistent evil. From the pond (which, the Alone in the Dark Web site suggests, is oddly shaped like a dog's head) to the zoo, this park holds a terrible secret.

Suffice it to say that hell is likely coming to the next-generation of game consoles.

Alone in the Dark preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3, Wii, PS2
Developer	Eden Games
Publisher	Atari
Available	June

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NINJA GAIDEN II

Let the bodies hit the floor

words Dave Halverson

Welcome to part 2 of "Pinch Me If I'm Dreaming Month" here at Play Magazine. First we find out that half of Sonic Unleashed is 2D, and then I fire up Ninja Gaiden II only to discover that Itagaki-san has finally, after 20 years, created a Ninja Gaiden for ordinary humans. I've loved every game in the series but I have to admit, as much as I love Ryu Hayabusa and especially all the lovely ladies of the Hayabusa clan, I don't know if I could hang with another traditional Team Ninja beat down. If that makes me a Ninja Dog then so be it; pass the Alpo.

Not that Ninja Gaiden 2 is easy. It all depends on what path you follow—Acolyte being the easiest and Master Ninja being the most difficult. Even on Acolyte, it's not like you can let your guard down; in fact, even the savviest block and parry experts will still receive their fair share of knock downs. The enemy is as cunning, agile, and swarming as ever, it's just that Ryu now regenerates health. The health meter has two layers: a regenerating blue bar, with permanent damage highlighted in red, which can be healed. Healing, along with changing weapons and Ninpo, is now assigned to an on-screen display

Can you hear me now?

that fades from view after each use (the game runs HUD free other than health) and items can either be found or purchased at Muramasa's (along with Blacksmith services) where unfortunately the prices still have not come down. Without going into too much more boring detail, everything is as it should be in terms of structure, only more varied and refined.

More than any other designer, Itagaki's indelible style reigns supreme. Ryu has always been his vessel but with each passing step up the technological ladder, his style has become that much more intimate. Here, he positions Hayabusa well in front of the camera so it's as if you're as much spectator as participant, and what a grand spectacle this is. Landing in a desolate New York City for chapter 3's Thunderclap Catastrophe, the rain-soaked city is an amazing visual feast; the only sign of life being the massive Jumbotrons playing Dead or Alive and Ninja Gaiden II movies. Modesty has never been Itagaki's strong suit. But what shakes you to the very core about Ninja Gaiden II is the pure brutality of it all. Never have I witnessed such graceful, almost poetic slaughter. Ryu's katana slices off appendages with ease and once an enemy has lost a limb, pressing Y in their vicinity cues Ryu's final wrath slicing off head and arms, as the spurting torso slumps to the ground—limbs and all from each battle lying where they fell as a reminder of each battle. Ninja Gaiden II, like its predecessors, is all about one-of-a-kind precision combat and out-of-body boss fights sprinkled with just the right balance of story, puzzle, item management, and platforming elements to remind us that we're on an adventure. And even those ancillary bits and pieces are programmed with impeccable care. There's something about the way Team Ninja uses the "next-gen" canvas that separates them from every other studio. The use of normal

> "...I fire up Ninja Gaiden II only to discover that Itagaki-san has finally, after 20 years, created a Ninja Gaiden for ordinary humans"

mapping is subtle—you may catch a glimmer of depth in a grain of wood—and the overall look, while abundantly detailed, appears sharp and clean. This is truly the work of masters on every level. I'm always humbled by their work, but never to such a degree as this. The character designs once again raise the bar, and the level of engagement—a product of all of the above coupled with the amazing score and the series-endemic framework—ranks somewhere that to get the benefit of, you REALLY need to be sitting in my seat.

Ninja Gaiden II preview

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	June

HELLBOY Science of Evil

Krome polished

words Dave Halverson

Among legions of comic book heroes Hellboy denotes a sort of headbanger alternative to all those spandex-clad do-gooders. He's a hero from hell; the kind of alpha protagonist I can really get behind. You might find a Hellboy fan at a Rob Zombie show or scoping out the latest rawk from Alter Bridge, while your average fan of men in tights is more apt to be pining for a new Bon Jovi ballad to drop while waiting for Journey to get back together. But there's another side to Hellboy. Underneath that thick red hide, sawed-off horns, glowing eyes, right hand of doom, and serpentine tail lies one of the most complex and altogether likeable super heroes to ever leak out of an artist's pen. He loves kittens, devours junk food by the bin and is a hopeless romantic. He's trustworthy, gentle, genuinely cares for humankind and has a spontaneously wry sense of humor. Mostly he's an unstoppable force from the pit of hell that popped through a portal opened briefly by Nazi occultists, but there's definitely more to the one they call Anung Un Rama than meets the eye. No matter what rocks your world, there's something here to bite down on. The occult, action, covert ops, comedy, drama, romance…Hellboy has it all. Not bad for a big red hairless ape.

Krome has gone all-out in the effects dept.

Nestled between Guillermo del Toro's first Hellboy feature film and the upcoming Golden Army, the game follows its own dark path—the only similarity being the implementation of the film's creature design. Apparently Ron Pearlman wasn't willing to lose half of his body weight from the waste down and have his legs shortened (pft—actors), so creator Mike Mignola and del Toro created an alternative to the spindly legged original. Dropping him into a gamespace with the full-on Ron Pearlman vocal treatment, he makes for one hell of a bad-ass good guy. If you thought a Hellboy videogame might consist of little more than a series of exotic landscapes over and on which "big red" would lay waste to demon-kind… well, you wouldn't be too far off, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Action and adventure is afoot and it packs one helluva punch.

On the trail of a putrid old witch that's been making off with ancient relics (and flaunting the world's most repulsive rack) to Romania we go, ripping through cemeteries, crypts, tombs and other such dimly lit gothic topography. Flashbacks also ensue taking us on a worldly excursion as Hellboy pieces together yet another perplexing paranormal predicament. The layered story—a collaborative effort between Mignola, del Toro, and Krome Studios—gives us two great tastes in one gory candy bar divided between those nutty Neo Nazis …*letz put ze arm on ze head…ya, das is goot!...* and a myriad of hellions comprised mainly of ravenous imps which Hellboy can punch, kick, and pound into oblivion, when he's not using them for target practice. Once stunned, popping off their heads provides the perfect projectile for ranged attacks or sealing tombs. The same applies to larger foes, only instead off ripping off their heads Hellboy wrenches free their weapon to return the favor. The combat overall in Hellboy is superb. Not only is it rife with punching, kicking, grappling, leaping, and pumping a laundry list of lead through the barrel of the Samaritan, but it's put to use against a formidable army of fiends that hold their own increasingly well as the plot thickens. This is a thinking man's brawler, rich with

How dare you attack me this close to a save point!

technique and a path that is almost never clear. Nothing comes easy to Hellboy as he makes his way to each climactic boss encounter, but where there's a will—and a talking skeleton or two—there's a way. There's even a fair amount of platforming to be had, along with well placed quick time events, and nearly everything in the environments is destructible, much of which can be picked up and used for clobbering enemies until it (or they) breaks. Science of Evil is a big, rich, high-concept, very expensive-looking Xbox 360 game. The character design, architecture, and in-game cinematics are all superbly crafted, and the attention to detail is extraordinary. Of note: the Abe Sapien cameo has been ditched (a wise choice—it didn't really gel) and replaced with an unlockable co-op mode using either Abe or Liz… "you should be running."

If Science of Evil was a "movie game" it would be the best one I've played since The Chronicles of Riddick, but then, movie games don't get this kind of treatment. The genius behind Science of Evil started in the board room, which is never the case, when someone said "rather than constrain ourselves to the rigors of creating a game based on the movie, let's make a game that further solidifies Hellboy as a top-quality brand. The last time that happened we got Diesel-powered perfection. I rest my case.

"Science of Evil is a big, rich, high-concept, very expensive-looking Xbox 360 game."

Hellboy: Science of Evil preview

System(s)	Xbox 360 (previewed) PS3
Developer	Krome Studios
Publisher	Konami
Available	June

WALL·E

A.I. cubed

words Dave Halverson

"...our first foray with America's soon to be new best friend is big on his own brand of unique fun."

Wall•E checks out the Axiom Repair Ward developed exclusively for the game.

Wall•E	preview
System(s)	Wii, PS2, DS, PSP, Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Heavy Iron
Publisher	THQ
Available	June

things aren't always as they seem…like those delectable-looking drive-thru menu items that resemble surplus cafeteria food left out in the rain once you remove them from the container that'll outlast the sell-by date of the planet. There is but a single ruse as nefarious…the movie trailer (although movie-game screenshots do round out the top three). You know you've been fleeced when you discover that the trailer you drooled over revealed the only momentous, pivotal and otherwise worthwhile scenes as you're watching the credits roll, sick from the ten dollar popcorn…that looked so good on the snack bar marquee. What does any of this have to do with Wall•E? Everything! The most recent trailer that has audiences swooning like nubile Hannah Montana devotees is a spoiler-free sampling of a truly special motion picture for which the game plays better than the screens look (and they look really good), and were it not for all those fast-food containers (plastic bottles and bags et al), Wall•E would still be a twinkle in his engineer's eye. Visiting Heavy Iron to get a firsthand look at Wall•E in action, I wasn't at all surprised to find general manager Lyle Hall more concerned with making a good game than following the chapters of the movie. The game follows the same trajectory, taking us from Earth to space, but places the emphasis on puzzle action and Wall•E's own unique brand of combat via areas exclusive to the game (shown here) as well as the film. The first scene in the game says a lot about the road ahead where Wall•E is swallowed up by the cityscape before him—a lone, evolving AI system on a barren planet. But he's definitely making the best of it. The little guy is into show tunes (why couldn't he find a Rush CD!) and keeping plenty busy running the gauntlet of mouse traps Heavy Iron has laid out before him. Boxing up different types of refuse, the initial gameplay is focused on cause and effect while negotiating a series of erector set-like constructs. Between his box jump, clever physics, and stacking up to three cubes on his head to hurl at targets, our first foray with America's soon-to-be new best friend is big on his own brand of unique fun.

Once Eve shows up, however, like all relationships, things get a bit more complicated. Eve stars in her very own (very cool) shooter, and works in tandem with Wall•E, flying him around like a stork to otherwise unreachable areas: fun stuff, and utterly adorable I have to say, but in a good way. Guess we know who wears the bolts in the family. Once Wall•E reaches space, combat ensues, versus security droids and other such movie-endemic creations, assisted by a strafe mode and target assist, together with Wall•E's cube-tossing action which takes on a new complexion through magnetic deflector cubes. It may be a BnL world (the WalMart-like Mega Corporation that makes EVERYTHING), but Heavy Iron has made it Wall•E's game. If you like 'em progressive—and who doesn't?—Wall•E delivers.

The differences between the 360/PS3 and Wii versions are, as you would expect, considerable. Heavy Iron have made it a point to highlight the Wii controls and include Wii-exclusive bells and whistles, giving the Nintendo version its own identity, however, backwards engineering from the 360 held them back from creating their ultimate vision on the Wii. The game looks good by Wii standards but lacks the gorgeous veneer applied to the beefier consoles. Streaming video displays, reflection and normal mapping and various lighting tricks don't make the cut. Laying out the company's approach to future Wii development, however, Lyle made it clear that they were just getting started. Expect their next Wii game to look infinitely better. Not to take away from Wall•E. It's a quality Wii game through and through, but the best is yet to come.

One of Heavy Iron's coolest inventions for Wall•E; 3-sided bridges called Tumblers are one of the game's many brain teasing puzzle/action devices.

Soulcalibur IV

A tale of win and own, eternally retold

words Nick Des Barres

Soulcalibur IV is going to be the best-received, best-reviewed game in the series since the original Soulcalibur on Dreamcast. Yeah, I said it–and I say it with confidence. **play** was invited to Namco Bandai's architecturally-startling Tokyo headquarters (really–the pyramidal behemoth might as well be a Soulcalibur stage itself) to get hands-on time with the game, and discuss features revealed for the first time with director Katsutoshi Sasaki.

First up was a look at the PlayStation 3 version of the game–the first time it had ever been seen by anybody outside Namco, according to Sasaki. In this age of sloppy, unoptimized PS3 ports, an inferior version is a valid fear...but then again, this is Project Soul. Were any of the three versions of Soulcalibur II any less awesome than the others? The answer, of course, is no; and though only three characters were yet playable on PS3, its version of SCIV was for all intents and purposes graphically identical to the 360's.

Sasaki next demonstrated for us the key new gameplay feature in SCIV, known as the Soul Gauge. As you block your opponent's attacks, one of three gauges found beside your life bar–corresponding to high, mid and low–will begin to fill. When one begins to flash red, another blocked

"Soulcalibur IV is going to be the best-received, best-reviewed game in the series since the original Soulcalibur on Dreamcast."

From the Horse Stance, no man can be moved.

attack of sufficient strength will cause that portion of your character's armor to shatter (or, in the case of female characters, shred clothing suggestively). This will open you up to a Critical Finish: Spectacular, pyrotechnic kills that will end the round regardless of how much life you have left. It may sound like nothing more than a marriage of Fighter Vipers's armor breaks and Guilty Gear's instant-kill system, but Project Soul has added an ingenious twist–the Soul Gauges are linked pendulum-style, and causing your opponent to block will reduce your gauge, while simultaneously increasing theirs. Only with extended play will it become apparent how viable a tactic forcing your enemies into a Critical Finish will be, but Sasaki promised that the tug-of-war aspect of the Soul Gauge will alter Soulcalibur strategies significantly.

By now even residents of Tunisia will know that Star Wars characters Darth Vader and Yoda will be playable on the PS3 and 360, respectively. Although both still had incomplete movesets, Sasaki showed off a unique feature they both share: the Force Gauge. It stands to reason a Jedi master and Sith lord should be able to wield the legendary power, and so they can–we saw Vader telekinetically dragging foes up off the ground and performing his infamous Force Choke ("I find your lack of faith disturbing"), while Yoda had a suite of acrobatic Force-based moves patterned off his duel with Count Dooku in Episode II. These powerful techniques drain the Force Gauge, positioned below the life bar, limiting their use and (hopefully) not breaking balance. Both characters also had unique stages inside the Death Star, using original John Williams score as BGM. Soulcalibur series maestro Junichi Nakatsuru told **play** he had toyed with the idea of giving the classic Imperial March a medieval makeover, but came to the conclusion that the original was simply too iconic to alter. We further noted that both characters were voiced by their original 1977 Japanese dub actors, though a query as to whether James Earl Jones and Frank Oz would provide the same service for the English version was rebuffed. And will Vader and Yoda ever become available on their rival platforms, perhaps as DLC? According to a cryptic Sasaki: "Well, we do want Soul fans to be happy, whichever system they have".

Topping guest appearances by a pair of the most iconic characters in pop culture history may be an impossibility, but that doesn't mean Project Soul isn't trying. According to Sasaki, SCIV will also sport "several" original guest characters designed by living manga legends, two of whom have been revealed so far: Yutaka Izubuchi of Lodoss, Patlabor and Gundam fame, and Mine Yoshizaki, author of Sgt. Frog. Izubuchi contributes svelte sorceress Scheherazade, who resembles nobody so much as Lodoss's high elf Deedlit, and Yoshizaki offers Angol Fear, a character who is officially the in-canon cousin to Angol Mois from Sgt. Frog. Both of the manga artist-designed characters revealed so far seem to be striving for an accurate recreation of their designers' styles in 3-D, rather than full aesthetic integration with the standard Soul characters. A curious design decision, perhaps, but a fascinating one.

All this, and we still know nothing about Soulcalibur IV's sure-to-be-epic one-player mode, nor the reportedly massively-enhanced create-a-character mode, nor any word on new storyline characters other than Hilde...and there are still more *mangaka*-created duelists to come, as well. Even as it stood the day we played it in March, SCIV was very clearly one of the greatest games Namco had ever made, and it can only go uphill from here. The tale of souls and swords will be retold June 24th on both platforms, and the day cannot come soon enough.

Soulcalibur IV

preview

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Project Soul
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Multi	2 Player
Available	June 24

According to director Katsutoshi Sasaki, **play** editors Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama were the first people outside of Namco to ever see the PlayStation 3 version of Soulcalibur IV in action.

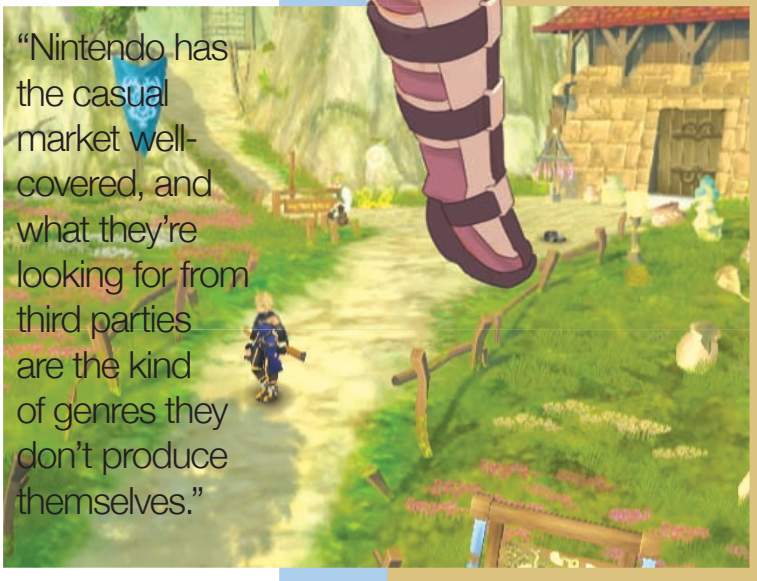
Tales of Symphonia

Dawn of the New World

interview by Dai Kohama
translated by Nick Des Barres

Interview with Tsutomu Gouda, Producer & Teruaki Konishi, Director

at **play**, we love the Tales series. A lot. Having been such big fans of the original Tales of Symphonia on GameCube, we're almost as excited about Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World for Wii as we are about Tales of Vesperia on Xbox 360. Set to be released in September in America, Dawn weaves the tale of Emil Castagnier and Marta Lualdi, two youths who lost their parents during the conflict at the end of Symphonia *(ed. note–beware of fairly major Symphonia spoilers in this interview)*. Set two years after those events, Dawn promises a unique look at a Japanese RPG world *after* its great crisis, something perhaps only seen before in Final Fantasy X-2. We sat down with Tales series producer Tsutomu Gouda and director Teruaki Konishi to talk about it.



"Nintendo has the casual market well-covered, and what they're looking for from third parties are the kind of genres they don't produce themselves."

play: Dawn of the New World will be the first direct sequel in series history since the Japan-only Destiny 2 *(ed. note–the game America received as Destiny 2 was known as Eternia in Japan)*. Why Symphonia, and why Wii?

Tsutomu Gouda: First, I have to say that the relationship between Destiny 1 and 2, and Symphonia and Dawn, is very different. Destiny 1 and 2 formed one compete whole, but Dawn doesn't have a "2" attached to it; we consider it to be a spinoff title. Of course, from a story perspective, the game is set two years after the original Symphonia and the script is written by the same person. In that sense it could be called a sequel, but in terms of gameplay... it's totally different from any Tales that's come before. You recruit monsters, there's no world map, we're trying different things. In that sense, we call it a spinoff. As to why we chose to revisit Symphonia, when we decided to make a Tales for Wii it was a natural decision. Symphonia was originally a GameCube game, and the most popular Tales worldwide.

Like you say, Dawn is set two years after Symphonia, yet the hero of the first game, Lloyd, almost seems to be positioned as an antagonist in trailers... what's the story behind that?

Teruaki Konishi: Well...if I told you the answer to that... (laughs) That's actually the core of the story. It's two years after Lloyd and his friends merged a world split in two and restored peace. That's where the story ends, but this game explores the aftermath. The world has become one, but what effect did two worlds colliding together have? There are now abnormal weather phenomena, and as always, humans are opposed to each other. The heroes of this tale set out on a journey to mend these ills, yet Lloyd stands against them. What are his true objectives? Why does he seek to hinder the hero Emil? This is the key throughline of our story.

TG: If we had made a straight sequel to Symphonia, Lloyd would have been the hero and there wouldn't have been any real hook. We want players to start off thinking "what's going on here?", exactly like your question (laughs).

Would you say proper enjoyment of Dawn is dependent on having played the original Symphonia?
TG: Since our original plan called for a spinoff, Dawn has been made so that people who haven't played Symphonia can enjoy it. With that said, however, the story links to the original are quite deep. I'm not sure what will happen in America yet, but the Japanese preorder bonus will have a recap of Symphonia's story.

TK: From a gameplay standpoint, the player has to collect items called Centurion Cores scattered around the world to restore balance. The search for these items leads the story, so new players will have no problem following it. However, characters like Lloyd from the original Symphonia will appear to help or hinder Emil, which we think old fans will enjoy. For new players, I hope they'll be intrigued enough–"Who are these people? What is their history?"–that they would try to learn a little more about the world of Symphonia.

Why do you think Symphonia was the most popular Tales?
TG: There's been a lot of debate inside the company about that, actually...but we never found a single answer. In Japan it had a lot of support from Nintendo, we had a limited edition pack-in GameCube...and in America Nintendo helped a great deal with the marketing. Another reason would be the fact that it was the first 3-D Tales and thus probably more well-received in America than the 2-D ones. In the end, I think the biggest reason was simply marketing.

Dawn of the New World certainly seems to be a traditional RPG...but the Wii market has skewed very casual. Has that caused you to make any game design changes?
TG: We really didn't think about it very much. One reason is that when development began, we didn't imagine the Wii would become so popular with casual gamers...or perhaps I should say, people who hadn't played many games before. The other reason...I was just speaking with Nintendo about this the other day. Nintendo has the casual market well-covered, and what they're looking for from third parties are the kind of genres they don't produce themselves. Nintendo feels that the "core user"–middle and high school students–is their weakest market segment. If third parties can support that market, it can only increase sales, as well as make for a good distinction from Nintendo software. Also, if we altered the game too much it would cease to be Tales.

TK: Although we have new features like the monster collecting, we're developing the core of the game as a traditional RPG. There hasn't been a real, solid RPG on the Wii yet, so that's what we're aiming for.

TG: There have been games like Koei's Opoona, but that was an all-new IP. I think Dawn may be the first traditional RPG on Wii from an established brand that has a certain amount of name recognition. Nintendo has very high hopes for the game, and believes the direction we've gone with the game design is right.

What has developing a traditional RPG on Wii been like? Was there anything you couldn't realize on the GameCube with the original Symphonia that became possible on Wii?
TK: The Wii has more RAM, so we've been able to use higher-resolution textures. At first glance it may not seem like a very large visual jump, but the details have been significantly enhanced. In that sense, we were finally able to realize what we had originally envisioned for Symphonia's world. We also think we've gotten a lot closer to a true expression of Kousuke Fujishima's *(ed. note–the original Symphonia character designer)* characters in 3-D.

TG: The proportions have actually been increased from the original Symphonia, so the characters look much more similar to Mr. Fujishima's original illustrations, and many textures have been redrawn

completely. I think we've done everything possible on a standard definition machine.

Dawn makes the bold choice of not using the Wii remote for much more than pointing. Were there any ideas during development for more active use of the controller?
TK: From the very beginning of development, we knew we weren't going to have the player swinging the remote. We never had a sense that a Wii game absolutely had to have motion control. We did have people coming up with ideas now and again, but none of them were really considered (laughs).

What would you say the ratio of new to old areas is? Can fans expect to revisit their favorite locations?
TG: Basically all of the towns. The same towns from Symphonia, and about half the dungeons. I'd say the ratio of new to old locations is exactly 5:5. But the old locations aren't exactly the same–there are changes in map gimmicks, and weather, and a town ruined in the first game may now be rebuilt.

One of the most popular aspects of the original Symphonia was the affection system and story branches. Has that been implemented or expanded upon in Dawn?

TK: We do have story branches, but no affection system per se. Instead, there is a new friendship system between recruited monsters and Emil. Depending on how well synchronized you are with them, you'll gain bonuses, like advantages in battle.

TG: It's not the same as the affection between characters in the original, which affected the story. The monster friendship system affects battle.

How many recruitable monsters are you planning for?
TG: Including monsters you can recruit as well as their evolutions, about 230. And, of course, there are the bosses...

TK: Essentially, you can recruit any enemy that isn't a boss.

TG: There are plenty of games that have a large number of monsters as their selling point...but often in those games, it's simply their color or size that's different. I can say with confidence that all our 230 are actually completely different. It's an extremely customizable system, too; you can raise monsters to carry over their abilities, teach them new abilities from items...if you really get into it you could play this game forever (laughs).

It almost sounds like you could do a completely monster-based Tales spinoff.
TG: That's what this game actually was at the beginning of development (laughs)! However, when we started working on the story it became very connected to the original Symphonia, and we realized fans would want to know what happened to the world after the end of that game, and what became of Lloyd and his friends.

Changing gears, the development team responsible for the original Symphonia is now making Tales of Vesperia on Xbox 360. Do they have any involvement with Dawn?
TK: The Dawn team does have members who worked on the original, but most of them are new. Of course, both games are being made at Namco Tales Studio, so we do know what Symphonia is supposed to be. But yes, it's mostly new staff.

The original game's characters were designed by Mr. Fujishima, but the new heroes are by a new, internal artist. Is there a specific reason for that? Was it difficult to make characters designed by someone else work with Fujishima's?
TG: I believe having Mr. Fujishima create the new characters may have been best, but as you know he was already working on Vesperia. He's a very busy man, and the schedule simply didn't work out. We have an art director here at Tales Studio, Daigo Okumura, who did the original Symphonia and Abyss, and his illustrations are very high quality. We decided to give him a shot at the characters this time.

TK: With regards to making Okumura's characters seem like they belonged in the same world as Mr. Fujishima's, Okumura has been working with Mr. Fujishima's art for many years. He knows how to design characters that won't stand out, and we worked especially hard with the 3-D models to make them look right standing next to each other. I'm not worried about it at all.

Vesperia will be the first Tales to have English voice for skits. Will Dawn follow the same pattern?
TG: We plan to localize all the voice in Dawn. This game is also part of the series' 10th anniversary in America, so we're working hard right now on an English version that will be the complete equal to the Japanese one.

That's wonderful news. Will full voice will become standard for all English versions of Tales from now on?
TG: I can't say (laughs). Other titles will be produced by other people...but I personally believe they should all be completely localized.

Can you say if the English voice actors who performed the original Symphonia characters will reprise their roles in Dawn, as is being done in Japan?
TG: The game is still being translated and the recording has not yet begun, so I can't say for certain, but we will absolutely do our best. Although the best-case scenario would of

course be to have all the actors reprise their roles, schedules might not be compatible. Should we not be able to secure an actor for a particular role, we plan to cast as similar a voice as possible.

Our time is up, but if you have a final message for American Symphonia fans...
TK: All our staff are working hard to wrap up development on Dawn of the New World, a traditional RPG on Wii we really think will be worth playing. I'm half-excited, half-trepidatious about hearing players' reactions, but I can definitely say we won't be betraying Symphonia fans' expectations. I also believe it'll be a fun game even if you haven't played the original, so please check it out.

TG: There are some 400,000 people in the West who played the original Symphonia, and I know they'll enjoy Dawn, as will anyone who enjoys a lengthy, high-quality Japanese RPG.

Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World — preview

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Namco Tales Studio
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Multi	NA
Available	June 24

X-Blades

Blonde ambition

words Dave Halverson

The dawn of good versus evil pitted two celestial beings (resembling enormous bipedal werewolves) against each other, unaware of which sibling reigned supreme over the universe. For centuries they battled until the enlightened one finally gained an advantage over his dark counterpart, sealing him away in an artifact, and in doing so relinquishing his own divine powers. Hiding the artifacts deep within a huge temple he found solace in the sacrifice he made to protect the people. For the obligatory videogame-story impaired, it is written that any potentially world-ending power that has been sealed away, must be unearthed and unknowingly released, only to be vanquished once and for all…unless the game sells enough to warrant a sequel in which case it will be discovered by children playing where they shouldn't outside a village where a descendant of the last warrior resides. Welcome to the classic all-purpose video-game trifecta: where there's a temple, an omnipotent artifact, and an alpha male or female to send in after it—just add genre. While the setup may be time honored, it's the gameplay that counts, and to an equal degree—especially if you're embarking on a traditional hack 'n' slash, like X-blade—the art direction, and character design, beginning with the hero or heroine (heroine if you're smart). Get that wrong and it doesn't matter how slick your combat is, it'll remain as buried as that artifact. The reason that X-Blade's will succeed in congress with its budget and projected sales goal, is because Gaijin knows this. Ayumi—the blonde you're staring at that's about to race into the temple even though it says right in the press material that she'll befall a horrible curse and that darkness will once again be awakened—is the epitome of intelligent female character design as it applies to the source material. She's scantily clad (as I imagine ancient races would be) yet endowed with wonderfully ornate armor (including the coolest boots like, ever) in the interest of reason. And Gaijin have no illusions about what they're creating. After clearing the first few stages, thoroughly impressed for it being pre-alpha, I inquired as to whether or not the entire game was comprised of entering an area, clearing out the monsters and fighting the boss.

The best argument for a manual camera, like, ever.

"Ayumi has one speed—hauling ass—and an arsenal of elemental magic techniques to augment her two Gun Blades, her core means of attack."

This is where most developers would start throwing out cleverly named systems and reasons why it's so much more. Not these guys. While Ayumi has access to a vast array of magic skills and techniques key to each field of battle from the outset, they pretty much tout the game's lavish visuals and combat as its core value. Remember when all games where "repetitious"? That didn't stop you from doing everything in your power to reach the next level did it? You probably bought Final Fight again just to control Guy. X-Blades is fast and furious area-clearing assault with an emphasis on exquisite settings drenched in technology and an endless bevy of creatures of every shape and size. Ayumi has one speed—hauling ass—and an arsenal of elemental magic techniques to augment her two Gun Blades, her core means of attack. Once you figure out what a given area's monster's weaknesses are, it's a matter of studying their patterns in order to approach the behemoth they're protecting. The camera is totally manual and the enemies extremely aggressive. They see you, they attack you; expect swarms. It's an exciting time in Russia right now where Gaijin resides and you can almost feel it coursing through the game's rapid-fire style. Beautiful girls, monsters, dreamlike gothic landscapes, action… "pri-krAs-niy!"

I can't say whether or not X-Blades will be the one arcade hack 'n' slash to rule them all (it's too early to tell—there is much balancing and tweaking to be done), but it certainly has all of the requisite ingredients. Ayumi "feels" really good, the architecture is stunning, there's a ton of spells and techniques to mess with, and the monsters thus far are completely original. Then of course there's the parallax mapping, high dynamic range lighting and rendering, radiosity lighting, radiance transfer/indirect lighting, rim lighting, subsurface scattering effects, shadow depth mapping, ambient shadows, volumetric lighting, motion blur, dynamic color correction, advanced image post-processing, animation blending, particle effects, trail effects, and one of the most epic asses ever.

X-Blades preview

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Gaijin
Publisher	Southpeak Games
Available	TBA

Speed Racer
The Video Game

Go! Speed Racer on Wii, Go!

words Dave Halverson

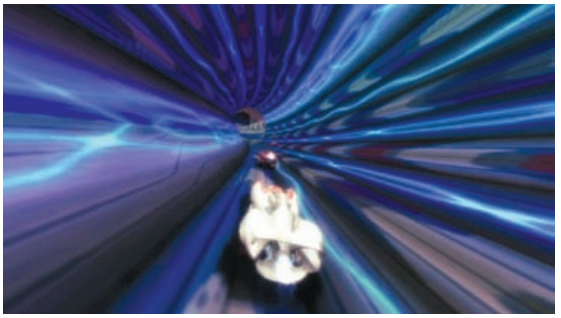
"The name of the game on the track is, of course, speed, blazing along the game's psychedelic armature while mastering 'car fu'…"

When the Wachowski brothers handpicked Shiny Entertainment (back when it was still a force to be reckoned with) as the exclusive developer for The Matrix videogames, it made perfect sense. David Perry and company were visionary game designers with an impressive pedigree and proprietary technology ready to push the PS2 and Xbox envelope. Returning for their second directorial debut with the adaptation of the classic Speed Racer anime, one would expect them to choose another name brand developer, especially given they had a mere 12 months to deliver a game…but one would be wrong. For the Wii (and DS for that matter, but more on that next time) version of Speed Racer the Bros. based their choice on the type of game they wanted to create over pedigree, which happened to be a lot like Sidhe's GripShift, a little known but very cool PSP racing platformer, making them the clear choice. Twelve months isn't enough time to create a solid 360 or PS3 game for sure, but it's not exactly an eternity for a Wii game either.

Given the time crunch and the fact that this is their first Wii project (no pressure),

Trixie gets a turn on the track in the videogame.

Sidhe has done a commendable job creating a companion piece for the film by incorporating the three main venues from the movie along with two of their own design working from locations the movie touches on only briefly. The setup is reminiscent of F-Zero with cars matched up to drivers with specific attributes, only in this case pulled from the ultra-flamboyant Speed Racer universe. We even get our hands on Trixie (Christina Ricci), along with a car designed specifically for the game inspired by her helicopter. The name of the game on the track is of, course, speed, blazing along the game's psychedelic armature while mastering "car fu," the art of using your car as a weapon. Using the Wiimote in much the same configuration as Mario Kart (Speed Racer is the first third-party racer compatible with the wheel), a quick sideways motion shunts your car left or right, doing so while holding a direction will cause you to spin attack, another move sends your car into a projectile flip, and so on. The deeper you progress into the circuit the more car fu skills come into play. It may sound hokey, but moving at speeds in excess of 350 mph over tracks that resemble maniacal rainbow-taffy colored roller coasters, using your car as a weapon is definitely a rush. Trash talking via the actual actors' voices is another welcome surprise (Emile Hirsch, Christina Ricci and Matthew Fox all make the scene), as is the ability to create alliances lending a bit of cinematic flair to the otherwise straightforward racing proceedings. Visually Sidhe do well where it counts; the car models look great and the sense of speed is excellent on the track, although some of the pre-race fly-bys leave much to be desired. Tracks range in size from short, to laps maxing out around four minutes—the longer variety being the perfect proving ground for boosting your way into "The Zone," a 500 mph light show of invincibility. Cool beans indeed.



Speed Racer The Video Game

preview

System(s)	Wii, NDS, PS2
Developer	Sidhe (Wii) Virtuous (DS)
Publisher	Warner Bros. Int. Ent.
Available	May (Wii, DS) fall (PS2)

DS VERSION

Virtuous Games impressive DS engine in effect.

Kung Fu Panda

Kickin' ass and eating dumplings...

Panda people:

An interview with Luxoflux on Kung Fu Panda

Joby-Rome Otero / Chief Creative Officer / Luxoflux
Steve Agoston / Studio Technical Director / Luxoflux
Chris Cowell / Lead Sound Designer / Luxoflux
Brian Clarke / Senior Producer / Luxoflux

words Dave Halverson

As we enter the summer movie deluge, studios all over the country are wrapping up the obligatory videogame offshoots. Some will be good, some will be bad, and this year some may just be great. After a jovial sit-down with Luxoflux CCO Joby-Rome Otero and a brief but telling hands-on session, I believe that Po and company may have the edge going in. Theirs is a thoroughly polished epic populated by the best cast of talking animals since Jungle Book, meant to appeal to an audience as wide as a film starring Jack Black as a clumsy, awestruck, dumpling loving, Kung-Fu Panda...

Kung Fu Panda	preview
System(s)	360 (previewed), PS3, DS, PS2, Wii, PC
Developer	Luxoflux Inc. (360 and PS3 versions)
Publisher	Activision
Available	May 27

play: For such a, shall we say, bulbous character, the melee combat in KFP feels incredibly fluid and intuitive. Did Po's proportions pose a challenge to get to this point?

JRO: Haha, yes, Po's "portly" proportions definitely posed a fun challenge – particularly for martial arts. For example, we wanted Po to look and move like he does in the movie, but a game has extra challenges. Films can zoom any time to heighten the moment of impact, but games must avoid taking control away from players. So, we use many tricks such as exaggerated squash and stretch in the split-second before impacts to add extra mass without feeling off character. This would be an issue with almost any character, but Po needs special attention due to his short legs and large belly.

Po's mass is big and squishy all over. We couldn't just add a little secondary motion here or there. We had to add extra controls throughout his skeleton and use real-time physics and collision to give his extra mass a life of its own without interfering with gameplay.

These challenges were greatly outweighed by the benefit of having such a unique hero. Where else do you get to use your belly as

Bores with axes, probably not good.

a weapon?!

Would you agree that a game's feel right out of the gate is paramount?
Absolutely! We tried to focus on making it fun for players to just move around and try things right from the start. That's part of what we call "toy factor." The term implies actions that are intuitive and that multiply each other to become more than the sum of their parts. Players will hopefully enjoy just running around and bashing into things, gaining a sense of control. Then, even the most hectic combat can be highly engaging rather than chaotic. And after all, what good are a bunch of gimmicks that happen once or twice per level if the ongoing experience doesn't feel good?

I love the Ghouls 'n' Ghosts double jump (allowing the second hop anywhere in the arc). Although I only played a couple levels it seems like there's a good bit of platforming ahead. What's the combat to platforming ratio?
JRO: We wanted a mix of roughly 2/3 combat and 1/3 platforming and other action, but with slightly different recipes in different areas. At the start of the game, Po is just dreaming that he's already a Kung Fu master, kicking butt left and right. Then Po wakes up and we realize that although he's the ultimate Kung Fu fan-boy, he's not a skilled fighter. Then, we rely on a bit more platforming until Po starts his training with Master Shifu and becomes truly skillful.

Talk to me about this water. Between the submerging lily pads and the boat challenge I was amazed. Could be the best 360 water yet. Is KFP riding on an existing engine?
SA: KFP was created using a new engine specifically designed and developed for the next-gen consoles. Our new engine allows us to take advantage of the vast power available on the PS3 and 360. The engine is also scalable, so adapting content to the PS2 and Wii can be done without using some other engine.

JRO: Effects like the water are the result of intense collaboration between brilliant engineers, artists and designers. Designers suggested what water could be used for in terms of game functionality and artists mocked-up the look and provided test materials. Tech engineers then conjured amazing tricks to enable beautiful water that renders in real-time while meeting functional goals of design—including interactivity via physics. The tools guys later made an artist-friendly interface so artists could dial in just the right look. Once it was all in-game, there was further collaboration to optimize it and adjust it for different uses—such as the lotus pad platforms that interact with water and characters for a believable and fun combination.

The voice actor does a superb Jack Black. If I didn't know it wasn't him I wouldn't know it wasn't him. Who is he? Tell me he's not some tall skinny guy…
CC: Mick Wingert did an outstanding job filling the hugely talented shoes of Jack Black. He was a true pleasure to work with, but to look at him you would not imagine he could summon the vastly varied vocal intonations of Jack Black. Being a Jack fan himself, he really put in the time before the recording sessions, studying and practicing to truly nail the lines. The biggest challenge was dialing in the right amount of "Jack" to fulfill player expectations while keeping Po inline with the direction the character was taken in the film. To achieve this we worked closely with DreamWorks to ensure the best balance possible, and we feel it was a great success due to the hard work and dedication of all involved.

How closely have you been able to work with Dreamworks on the particulars? The game feels very much like a collaboration. Everything seems perfectly representative of the film universe.
BC: Luxoflux, Activision and DreamWorks have worked very closely together on Kung Fu Panda. There is a sharing of information about the main characters and general storyline from the film, since these things are particularly important to integrate into a game based on a movie. Making sure that there is consistency in the general look of the game and film environments is also part of the collaborative process. However, there were other areas in which we were able to coordinate and share in order to help bring the game to fruition. For example, when creating new characters for the game, the artists at DreamWorks worked closely with us to ensure that they were consistent with the look and feel of the ones in the movie. Collaborating in this manner has helped to make the Kung Fu Panda videogame a cohesive and beautiful experience to behold.

Seems like there is an ample rewards system for collecting rare coins and money. Can you elaborate?
JRO: There are three main collectibles in the levels: Coins, Rare Coins and Figurines. Coins are abundantly scattered throughout levels to make the ongoing experience even more rewarding, but also to gently lead players to the best route and to encourage lots of replay.
Coins are also linked into the role-playing element, where players can fine-tune Po to their liking. Players can upgrade Po's stats such as strength, health, attacks, and combos, as well as abilities such as Iron Belly Technique and Panda Stumble or even his outfits.
Rare Coins and Figurines are harder to find—with no more than one to three in each level. These collectibles immediately unlock new multi-player maps, characters or other cool stuff, as well as count toward the level completion percentage and add to replayability.

You've cut your teeth on some major film franchises but I have to say Kung Fu Panda definitely looks and feels like your best yet. Do you attribute this to technology or experience within this very unique collaborative process?

"Innovation is important, but so is accessibility and, ultimately—fun factor trumps all else.."
- Joby-Rome Otero

JRO: It's a combination of all those things and more. Good games are the result of the hard work of a good team, focused on a shared vision and working within a structure that allows and requires the best efforts of every department.
However, our experience working with huge films - and DreamWorks in particular - was invaluable. We already understood that although we could follow every detail of the film, it's even better to let players see the broader world that is only implied by the film and then synchronize with the biggest, most memorable moments of the movie. Expanding into a game world requires going way beyond mimicry. Past experience taught us the importance of understanding the rules of the world, more so than the details, so that our creative decisions result in a sincere and authentic extension of the movie.

One of our levels featured a playable version of Po's master (Master Shifu). Are all of the furious five playable? If so only briefly or is this a team game? …It's mainly Po's game I hope…
JRO: It is mostly Po's game. The Furious Five and Shifu are playable to varying degrees and for different durations. For example, Master Shifu is playable through two full levels. He has taught the Furious Five for decades, so playing as him definitely takes the experience up a notch. The other key characters also get a share of the spotlight in single-player, but to a lesser degree. Beyond that, there are a total of eight fully playable characters in multiplayer.

I love the apes, hogs, crocs, etc… They definitely give the game a much needed edge. Are these characters you created or cutting room floor fodder that didn't make the final cut?
JRO: Most of those are based on loose sketches or early color art that DreamWorks had done before solidifying their story. Initially, the main villain—Tai Lung—was going to have a small army of thugs, but DreamWorks realized that Tai Lung was so powerful that he was really his own army. Of course, when a game has to expand a two hour film experience into something much bigger, you can't fight the same guy over and over. So we dug deep into all the designs, including the unused characters, modified them to suit a variety of goals and then brought them to life with DreamWorks providing tremendous support to ensure that they really felt like characters straight out of the film universe. We also wrote up elaborate background stories and organizational charts so that each character was linked with an interesting history that details their look, sound, associated gameplay, frequented locales and how they behave in cinematics.

The game is obviously coming out on every system known to man but the 360 code looks like a thoroughbred effort. Are you developing solely for 360 and PS3?
SA: Our development efforts are focused primarily on PS3 and 360 but we also support PC/DirectX development.

At the end of the day I have to admit, I'm a sucker for traditional action-adventure epics in all of their next-gen glory. You don't have to reinvent the wheel to make me smile. Do you find that most consumers feel the same? What's your philosophy as a studio?
JRO: Innovation is important, but so is accessibility and, ultimately—fun factor trumps all else. We *do* aim for a degree of innovation, particularly before pre-production ends and the riskiest R&D must be finished to avoid jeopardizing the entire project. An innovative idea will survive pre-production as long as it is organic to the game, reinforces other aspects of the game and is accessible to players.
We try to be very honest with ourselves when an idea isn't working. Even in the earliest stages, we're equally focused on highly actionable items that make the most sense for the overall game, regardless of how innovative they are. If and when innovative stuff doesn't work out, we still have a rock solid core that can be built upon and varied.

NBA Ballers: Chosen One

'Hoop' and Holler

words Greg Orlando

You, too, can be basketball's fortunate son, trampling over such NBA stars as Allen Iverson, Dirk Nowitzki, Stephon "Starbury" Marbury, Steve Nash, and Yao Ming. But it's certainly a long way to the top if you want to rock and or roll in the finest basketbrawl fashion.

NBA Ballers: Chosen One offers condensed street hoops basketball action. Players take the role of a neophyte player as he raises himself up through the ranks, playing a series of one-on-one and two-on-two contests, as well as three-man shootarounds against NBA stars. The game emphasizes showmanship over sportsmanship with over-the-top dribble moves, steals, passes, and dunks, and pushes the lifestyle aspect of the game well past any reason or logic. Why wouldn't a basketball player care to take his jet (and his huge entourage) to a one-on-one game?

An extensive create-a-player mode allows for the creation of a superstar with steroided muscles, a prodigious gut, a knife-like chin, etc., in a nigh-endless slider-controlled set of menus. It's possible, then, to fine-tune a player by allocating statistics points in various offensive and defensive categories: steals, low-post play, three-point shots, strength, stamina, and blocking (among others).

Then, it's into the meat grinder. Talented rapper Chuck D, he of Public Enemy fame, serves as Chosen One's host and on-court announcer. It's good to see the original Tenacious D at work, and the man does a fine job of playing the serious, pen-flipping announcer in a series of TV show videos preceding each set of challenges. D's deep voice and melodic cadence are well suited to in-game commentary and Midway wisely keeps his quipping to a minimum. It is, however, a thrill to have D proclaim, in an excited tone, "Get that away from here!" after a particularly spectacular shot rejection.

As for the rest, the basketball action is fluid and well-animated. There's little in the way of awkward transitions, especially when a basketball player is spinning, juking, and twirling to get away from the opposition. Further, two new gameplay systems have been added to the mix in the form of "act a fool" combinations and "shut 'em down" super moves. The combination moves allow for a series of flashing dodges, weaves, and spins, culminating in the game flashing specific button commands on screen. If a player presses the required button in time, the combination continues successfully and leads to even more exaggerated moves such where one player can outwit an opponent by bouncing a ball off the foe's head or foot, spinning around the perplexed enemy's body, or passing the ball underneath the sucker's legs. The supermoves are equally flashy, punctuated by non-interactive cut scenes of superdunks, steals, and the like. It's especially neat to note that here a diving, horribly exaggerated roll for a loose ball is known as the "Captain Kirk."

It will be possible, as the kids say, to jam the rock come April.

> "It's especially neat to note that here a diving, horribly exaggerated roll for a loose ball is known as the 'Captain Kirk.'"

NBA Ballers: Chosen One	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Developer	Midway
Publisher	Midway
Available	April

"A depth of detail that can only come from designers that, well, love to play golf."

We Love Golf

words Heather Campbell

Very much

did you like playing WiiSports golf as much as I did? I hear everybody prefers the bowling game, and for a time I enjoyed that, too … but the real glory in WiiSports was golf. And you know what? There hasn't been a golf game that's really grabbed my attention since the pack-in game came out a year and a half ago.

That is, until now.

We Love Golf (which sadly can't be called Wii Love Golf because of Nintendo's trademark) has the easy accessibility of a casual title, but with a depth of detail that can only come from developers that, well, *love to play golf*. Hiroyuki and Shugo Takahashi both play golf weekly, and have designed their courses with the input of professional golf-course designers. These are guys who want to share their love of golf with the rest of the world -- part of me believes that the game's title was the way they began their pitch to Capcom.

The golfing is handled with patient swings of the Wiimote; drag the 'mote back to set the power of your swing, and then follow a club cursor towards a point along a line to deliver the accuracy. Power swings use the accelerometer of the controller, but most swings are based on time and angle. Curve the 'mote in to hook, etc. To get a lay of the land, you hold the Wiimote in the air, not unlike a golfer who holds his club at the length of his arm to gauge distance.

Beyond the really smooth presentation of the title, and the immediately intuitive controls (I won't say that I beat the Takahashi brothers … because they asked me not to mention it in the article), the preview session included the ability to dress your golfers in various Capcom fashion. This may not be Capcom Bros. Golf, but the roster of Phoenix Wright, Zack and Wiki, and Street Fighter characters is sure to make the fans happy. There's a lot to unlock in the game, too; each character has advanced stat versions to play with, and additional courses appear after a couple of successful play-throughs. The taunt feature, which fills opponents' screens with cheers and jeers, lends the game a party atmosphere, without getting silly.

Furthermore, there's the robust online match-system. While it may not be Live, the golf-game match-making is for the American and European releases. The Takahashi brothers said they really wanted to give something extra to the Western fans, and it shows. Taking on a stranger (or a friend, using those awful friend codes) is as easy as the press of a button – and as any player knows, the game gets better when you're competing against a real person.

We Love Golf is cute without getting silly, fun without being shallow, and it's got enough golf in its guts to satisfy some harder-core gamers. Someone has finally gotten it.

We Love Golf	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Camelot
Publisher	Capcom
Available	July

The special effects hit strong and often.

Velvet Assassin

Killing me softly...

words Brady Fiechter

The life that I have/Is all that I have
And the life that I have is yours
The love that I have/Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours
A sleep I shall have/A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause
For the peace of my years/In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours

This is how a lady becomes a killer.

When she's not writing inspiring poetry, Violette Summer draws her inspiration from the supple intoxication of burning Nazis alive in gasoline fires, and pulling pins from live grenades strapped to her victim's belt, and using a good sharp blade to slit a throat.

Miss Summer is the assassin in Velvet Assassin, a stealth game that spins its tale off the real-life woman who snuck through the killing fields of World War II Europe, making quite the name for herself as an efficient killing machine. In the game, there are no sides: you'll come across scenarios like poisoning your allies before they are broken by the break-happy Germans.

Velvet Assassin is framed through dream sequences, as Violet lies drugged up in a hospital bed recalling the past events leading to her incapacitation. The flashbacks mirror actual events and places, where the goal is to alter the path of Violette's personal history through gameplay choices and further reveal the course of her storied life. To strengthen the chance for a successful mission—you know how it goes: gather intel, kill the big man, sneak out alive—in the fantasy of your dream world, you can inject a shot of heroin to slow down time.

In a game about stealthy hits—expect several dozen options for the kill—it is no surprise to see a dominance of shadows and nifty lighting affects drawing you into that darkness. Would it be unfair to compare Velvet Assassin to the Splinter Cell franchise? German developer Replay Studios used the reference themselves when describing the control scheme. Fair enough, but the Metal Gears and Splinter Cells of the world certainly aren't this overtly bleak.

Velvet Assassin	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Replay Studios
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	Q3 2008

Gallery

Capcom Arcade (new) classics

Capcom goes smaller scale for the downloadable market

words Brady Fiecther

If you happen to recognize the roots of these XBLA and PSN games, then we at Play salute you for your rich gaming past. And if you don't have a clue what these games might be all about, well, it's time to start downloading in the next few months and experience a little bit of history extended inside a modern frame. These games aren't remakes, but new takes on classic franchises, along with the invention of new ideas that hold onto older conventions. Make sure to bring a friend along for the play.

1942 Joint Strike

Bionic Commando Rearmed

Commandos 3

Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix

Plunder

Mushroom Men

Spores not included

words Brady Fiechter

When humans are dreaming in the wee hours of the morning, the mushroom men are waging a full-scale war against the sentient animal and plant kingdom, who have been infected by the life-giving spores dumped on our precious planet by a rogue comet. As legend has it, you will be fending off the evil rabbits and lacerating killer vines that lurk in the dank garage and out in the frightening garden. The most terrifying thing of all: your little mushroom man hero's poor mushroom cap head gets chipped away during the fight, exposing his little brain inside. Nice. Fending off the evil that lurks in this tiny organic world requires fashioning an assortment of weapons from the junk lying around: a DS stylus, glue and thimble is a good start. For the record, the question had to be posed, but Red Fly Studio insists there was no mescaline research going on while crafting their adventure.

Mushroom Men	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Red Fly Studio
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	Fall

Blast Works

YouTube for Gamers

words Heather Campbell

The next big thing in gaming is going to be user-generated content. You heard it here. And Blast Works is going to be the first major game out of the gate. A side-scrolling shooter, Blast Works' gimmick is that while your ship takes only one hit to die, you can collect other dead ships, Katamari style, and defend your fragile center with a larger and larger floating junkyard.

But the best part of the game is the level editor. Make your own ships, levels, everything, and load it to blastworksdepot.com. Anyone else can play them by downloading it to their Wii, assuming it gets past the censors. Ever wanted to craft your own (unofficial) Evangelion/Battlestar Galactica doujin shooter, but were overwhelmed by the idea of learning game design? Blast Works is the answer. Guys, this is a really, REALLY exciting title.

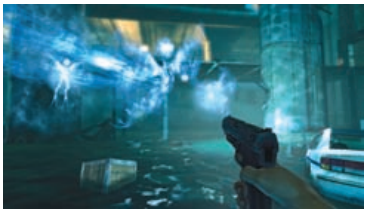
Blast Works	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Budcat Creations
Publisher	Majesco
Available	May 6

Legendary: The Box

Monster mash

words Brady Fiechter

It's interesting when a gamemaker offers the chance to periodically play through the same level throughout the development cycle, revealing the tweaks and changes as you see the quality progress. Legendary: The Box continues to show great improvements, revealing a lot more of the designer's strong vision for a game that is heading for a pure action experience. This latest look better showcases the intent to be more about run-and-gun and less about duck-and-cover; the use of a run button becomes imperative when you're facing down faster moving creatures, keeping the action in the open for some might fun face offs. High hopes for Legendary: The Box.



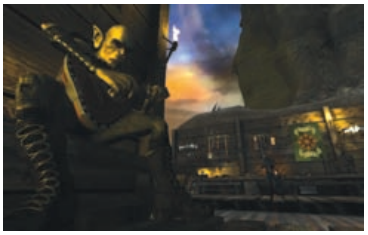
Legendary: The Box	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Spark
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	Summer

Dungeon Hero

A hero among goblins

words Brady Fiechter

Dungeon Hero's protagonist is being described as a bit unhinged, which is fair enough when you watch him wantonly mutilate every living being in the path of his blade. These screenshots don't lie: Dungeon Hero is indeed an action-RPG that recalls the medieval fantasy of a Diablo, but as the story goes, the combat here is going for a "realistic" approach to mass slaughter. The setting is first established in an underground vault of wounded goblin soldiers who've just come in from battle; in the corner, a lonely soldier plucks his lute. The designers continue to talk about an authentic setting within the magic of the world, a place where you see creatures behaving with a brush of personality. Very good-looking game for the genre…



Dungeon Hero	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Firefly Studios
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	Q1 2009

Reviews

May 2008

Monster Madness: Grave Danger
Dark Sector
Death Jr.: Root of Evil
Persona 3: FES
Arcana Heart
Gran Tourismo 5
Rainbow Six: Vegas 2
Silent Hill Origins
The World Ends With You
Super Dodgeball Brawlers
Myst DS
Wild Arms XF
Flatout: Head On

play Staff "Round-up"

Dave Halverson

Publisher

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, sandbox, rhythm
Now playing: Not! More 2D choices... Astal, Guardian Heroes, Dynamite Headdy, DKC2, Silhoutte Mirage, Battletoads Arcade, Mischeif Makers, Odin Sphere, Sonic CD, Viewtiful Joe...
Top 2 2D all-time: Castlevania SotN, Earthworm Jim (Special Edition)

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: PixelJunk, Mario Kart Wii **Top 2 2D all-time**: Super Metroid, Castlevania: SofN

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now Playing : Rainbow 6: Vegas 2, Mutant League Football (EA Replay) **Top 2 2D all-time**: Narc, ToeJam and Earl

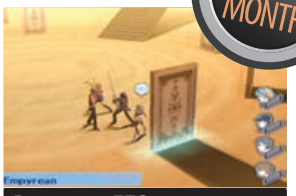
Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Age of Conansurf, Sam and Max: Beelzebub **Top 2 2D all-time**: Guardian Heroes, Gunstar Heroes

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Persona 3 FES

pg.058

The play rating system

TBA?

Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Time Hollow, Ryu ga Gotoku Kenzan!
Top 2 2D all-time: Street Fighter III: Third Strike, Suikoden II

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: The World Ends With You
Top 2 2D all-time: Kolibri, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Ridge Racer 7, FES, Skate
Top 2 2D all-time: King of Fighters 98, Phantasy Star

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc. **Now playing:** Tactics A2, World Ends With You, No More Heroes
Top 2 2D all -time: Street Fighter III, Out of This World

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: PixelJunk Monsters, MKWii
Top 2 2D all-time: Gunstar Heroes, Super Mario World

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Monster Madness

Grave Danger

Proudly ported with prowess

words Dave Halverson

When Artificial Studios' Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia finally crossed the finish line (I'd been following its progress for two years) I was elated…and with good reason. Top-down shooting action being one of the genres I cut my teeth on, I sorely missed them since they fell from grace more years ago than I care to remember. So the introduction of a massive-scale, one-to-four player zombie assault reminiscent of the genre staple Zombies Ate My Neighbors was big doings, especially normal mapped from

"On its way to becoming Grave Danger, Psyonics refined and remixed Suburbia to the extent that they deserve an urban renewal award."

village to dell with a kooky cast in tow, including a four-eyed super geek, slinky goth chick, rad surfer dude, and the always-entertaining mega-chested narcissistic blonde dumbbell. It had its share of quirks and a single, somewhat awkward control scheme, but I still saw my way to a great score based on originality, scope, character design, diversity and one helluva cool twist. Bear in mind that I'm one to accept, adapt, and move beyond a game's shortcomings as long as it's possible to do so. Like having to press down on the right analog to jump: it's definitely annoying, but in no way a deal breaker, especially if the game strikes a visual chord in a genre I love. It's like all those Half-Life fans who totally accept lifting, carrying and throwing a crate via long invisible telescopic arms or driving with no hands on the steering wheel with their legless floating torso of a character. Same thing.

I knew that a PS3 version of Monster Madness was planned but 100% of the time, 360-to-PS3 ports suffer like a one-legged blind Chihuahua eating scraps behind a Korean BBQ. On top of that, Grave Danger was farmed out to Psyonics, whoever that was...

On its way to becoming Grave Danger, Psyonics refined and remixed Suburbia to the extent that they deserve an urban renewal award. They've completely made it their own. Any extraneous events have been washed away—some for the better, some perhaps not—the single-player over-the-shoulder camera has been discarded (grumble, grumble), the game's scattered collectible parts used to purchase weapons and upgrades have been tucked neatly into big red tool boxes (distributed evenly between players to avoid hording), boss battles have been refined and redesigned, a new character-specific attributes system has been implemented, and many a scenario has been overhauled and/or streamlined. The game looks better too, so crystal clear and vivid via HDMI that you'll be reaching for your Oakleys, and the controls have been completely remapped for optimal acclimation and ease of use. Four-player online co-op has also been added (vehicles included) and when the dust settles on adventure mode, 25 new über-textured challenge levels await that run the gamut from vehicular bedlam to mass destruction. Top it all off with more unlockable costumes than you can shake Jennifer's jumbo jugs at and you've got the ultimate end-all, do-all kick butt top-down action-shooting game (which means exactly squat to anyone who's not in the market for one).

Games like Monster Madness: Grave Danger are why I wish we didn't have to muck up every review with a number. Stacked up against its forebears I'd award it with a score that would elicit foul language and mass confusion in many a chat room. Stacking it up against anything else, to me, just doesn't make sense. I guess that's just the way the cookie crumbles in the world of video game reviews. So let's forgo the score on this one, and in its place I'll simply say that if you're in the market for a top-down action-shooter Monster Madness: Grave Danger comes Very highly Recommended.

Yeah I drive a Bug. You got a problem with that?

Monster Madness: Grave Danger

score VR

+	Everything you could possibly ask for in a top-down action-shooter…and then some.
–	People that don't like top down shooters (or monsters…or cheeky zombie humor) won't agree. Mild language and wiggly lady parts may offend someone, somewhere. Suggestive themes and tobacco references could lead to the end of civilized society.

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Psyonix Studios
Publisher	Southpeak Games
Online/Multi	4-player online co-op
ESRB Rating	T
Available	May

Dark Sector

Catch the sickness!

words Casey Loe

I know there's nothing game developers hate more than hearing their masterwork—a game they've poured their hearts and souls into for years—be thought of as merely a knock-off of some other popular game. But at times like this, there just isn't any better way to put it; Dark Sector is basically Gears of War, only... Not as good. It's not bad, mind you. If you liked Gears of War, or the shooting parts in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, you'll like Dark Sector… Just not as much. Digital Extremes really have only themselves to blame for their lack of ambition; they clearly have the talent to put together a solid third-person shooter, but they should have found something more original to build around than a small handful of unique character abilities.

The hero of Dark Sector is Hayden Tenno, a reluctant special agent who probably should have spent a little more quality time with his NSA therapist. But duty called, so he was shipped off to stop a biological weapon in Eastern Europe, where he promptly became infected himself. Good news, though—this is one of those T-Virus type things that turn you into an unstoppable killing machine, and thanks to a half-effective vaccine, Hayden is able to retain his mopey attitude while gaining all the usual video-game virus traits: Super-strength, immunity to pain, and the sort of physical mutation that makes him look badass without marring that pretty, pretty face. This particular

virus also bestowed a few unusual (and extremely implausible) symptoms upon Hayden, including the ability to pull a triple-bladed boomerang known as a glaive from his arm.

There are plenty of cool things that Hayden can do with his special abilities, like decapitating a row of foes, using the glaive to pick up dropped weapons while hiding behind cover, or generating a shield that can deflect a projectile from one enemy to another. Dark Sector can be a lot of fun when you're using Hayden's special tricks, but at its core it is a shooter, and there are a few holes in its shooting fundamentals. The enemy AI is horrible; if you're in a position where you can hit an enemy who is behind cover, they'll stubbornly hold their position even as geysers of blood are spewing out of their bodies. Even more comically, sometimes when an enemy hits the ground, one of his friends will run in to immediately take over the same exposed cover. Enemies barely react when shot, and when you attempt to kill certain foes at melee range, they'll just stand there shooting you as you flail away at them. These flaws had me worried for the first few levels, but when the game hit its stride around the fourth chapter (of ten) and the challenge started picking up, I stopped caring about the AI quirks and started enjoying the action. Dark Sector's big shooting set pieces fall into the same formula used in every other cover-based shooter, but it's a good formula, and the glaive provides just enough of a twist to make it interesting again. Between battles there's a bit of light, Zelda-style puzzle solving, such as using the glaive to light a series of torches so you can carry a flame over to a flammable piece of rubble. Solving these puzzles and searching for hidden gun modifications usually provide a welcome break from the action, but there are times when the puzzles can be infuriatingly opaque. For example, one sequence pits you against a mech-like boss without clearly communicating that your objective is not to destroy it, but to yank out its pilot and take his place. (That one had me quite peeved, but the sweet mech sequence that followed made up for it.)

Dark Sector is visually impressive, capturing the feel of a war-torn Eastern Europe while allowing a touch of natural beauty to peak through every now and then. (There are some tearing issues though, so people who are sensitive to that sort of thing may not find them so attractive.) The music is... Uh... Now that I think about it, I'm not sure that Dark Sector has any music. The sound effects are nice, I guess?

If it sounds like I'm struggling to say something nice about Dark Sector, I suppose I am. After the first few bumpy levels, I had a lot of fun with Dark Sector, but it's hard to recommend a game that copies all of its mechanics and most of its look from existing titles without really improving upon them in any way. It feels less like its own games and more like a solid, slightly unpolished single-player level pack for Gears of War. It's hard to imagine anyone but the most insatiable third-person shooter fan would be willing to drop $60 for that, but do keep Dark Sector in mind for when it inevitably drops in price or turns up used. Shooter fans may not respect it, but they will enjoy it.

"There just isn't any better way to put it: Dark Sector is basically Gears of War, only... Not as good"

This dude is in glaive danger.

Dark Sector score **7.0**

+	Fun abilities add some spice to a familiar formula
–	Bad AI, a few frustrating parts, not much originality

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Digital Extremes
Publisher	D3
Online/Multi	Online & LAN competitive multiplayer
ESRB Rating	Mature
Available	Now

Death Jr.: Root of Evil

To die for

words Dave Halverson

You can tell a lot about a game within the first few minutes of gameplay, by the look and feel of the main character, the camera, sound design, and the overall visual presentation. More so for character-driven action games than any other genre, those first few moments are key in laying the foundation for the long road ahead. This is where Death Jr.: Root of Evil (much more so on Wii than PSP) has an almost unfair advantage. Deposited into the game world immediately following the prologue, you're faced with a floating, lipless torso in a jar (with attitude), a timid, somewhat bohemian-looking girl with large bleeding holes in her hands, erudite twins conjoined at their bulbous heads, and the vision of gothic bliss that is the raven-eyed Pandora. Oh, and if you need anything talk to the Dead Guppy on the table. Meanwhile you are in command of a squat surf-green animate skeleton carrying a huge scythe; meet Death Jr. Now go save his daddy.

The first thing you'll notice is how cool DJ feels as he saunters down the path, his physics and percolated demeanor making him a joy to control. Wielding his enormous scythe or shifting seamlessly into shooting stance, picking off targets by pointing the Wiimote while strafing with the Nunchuk, you quickly realize that he was born to rock this console. This is no rezzed-up version of the PSP game: Root of Evil has been completely re-fabricated for the Wii from the ground up by an art staff bent on making the hardware shine along with the tools and talent to make it happen. By simulating the complex shaders found on the meatier consoles, Backbone has managed to produce visuals on par with or beyond many a first-party Wii game, in less

"The first thing you'll notice is how cool DJ feels as he saunters down the path, his physics and percolated demeanor making him a joy to control."

time, at half the cost. Speaking with DJ Art Director Norm Badillo at GDC I learned that as good as DJ looks, they had it looking even better, but had to scale it back to stay within budget. If Root of Evil does well enough for Eidos to order a sequel, there's a lot more where this came from, and barring a boycott on killer apps for the hottest console in the land I don't see how it can miss.

As in love with the DJ universe as I am—and he's dangling from the rear view of my WRX if that's any inclination—I'm equally fond of the gameplay, and platformers are my thing, the more deviceful the better. The action in Root of Evil is divided pretty evenly between combat and platforming (with a wee bit of exploration and clever cause-and-effect on the side), both of which ramp up over the course of the game in league with the terrain, which becomes increasingly diabolical as you progress, and the enemy AI. Things begin simply enough but by game's end you'll have DJ (and/or Pandora) swinging, grappling, hovering, and sliding his way through the games dexterous platforming maneuvers and dispensing the series' special brand of gunplay like a couple

of pint-sized lethal weapons. Not only is the shooting now completely intuitive and satisfying, but via the new Field Manual, there's no waiting to build or augment your weapons. Once you find the requisite parts (handy checklist included), Smith and Weston are available anytime, anywhere to fill your order, and you just can't beat an arsenal that includes a Flaming Toilet Paper Launcher and homing C4 Hamsters.

Wicked cool character design, cutting edge Wii visuals, great level design, a double-shot of great gameplay, massive bosses and a quirky score that ties it all together…what more could you ask for? Unrestricted 2-player co-op you say? Not a problem. And don't forget replayabilty: Once you're through with DJ, Pandora awaits making this one box that's begging to be opened.

Death Jr.: Root of Evil — score 9.0

+	The perfect blend of platforming and gunplay in an irresistible cartoon Goth universe with some of the most impressive Wii visuals to date.
–	A remixed soundtrack would have been nice (it's a bit barren in places). Water effects aren't on par with the overall presentation.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Backbone Ent.
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	2-player co-op
ESRB Rating	T
Available	May

DJ's number one with a gun, and of course a scythe.

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 FES

Twice as nice for (nearly) half the price

words Eric L. Patterson

Twenty-six issues after my official debut in the pages of play, my fingers for the first time type the number "10" in place of the text that will end up in the score box you see at the finale of this review. Believe me when I say I do not give this score lightly; nor do I consider Persona 3 FES a perfect game. I cannot, simply because never in my life have I played a game where I didn't feel that something could have been changed or improved for the better.

Why FES deserves the score I have given it is simple: this is not merely a fabulous game made better, it is a love letter from Atlus, a thank you to the fans who sung the praises of Persona 3 and a chance for those gamers who missed out on the experience the first time around to make their introduction to the game even sweeter.

The first of FES's two sides is "The Journey" (aka Episode Yourself), where the original game we were presented in Persona 3 is tweaked and refined (in a very director's cut-esque) fashion to give an already amazing title an extra layer of polish, while also giving fans a few specific elements that were surprisingly absent before. (I don't want to spoil anything, but let's just say that a particular Social Link that previously didn't exist is now in place.) Persona 3 was the best RPG of 2007 for good reason, so please don't misunderstand: FES was not born because the original game felt in any major way incomplete or in need of fixing. It is, instead, the understanding that even the best of games can always be made better.

That there is then a second half to the package–"The Answer" (aka Episode Aigis)–almost seems ludicrous considering the fact that we're already getting an updated version of an RPG that was previously a steal at $50. I look at The Answer as more of a gift to the longtime MegaTen fans; a bonus dungeon crawling experience where the difficulty is cranked, Persona fusion and advancement is more of a challenge, and most of the storyline and Social Link elements have been stripped away. The Answer won't be for everybody, but that's okay; it's there if you want to spend time with it, but takes nothing away from your enjoyment of the main storyline if you don't.

It truly dawned on me how amazing of a game the original Persona 3 was when, after having spent 90+ hours in my first time through, ten minutes after starting my second play-through via FES I realized just much I honestly missed these characters and their adventures. Even if you already own the original, pick up FES for its new content and Aigis-centered additional chapter, or simply as a good excuse to give the game another go. For the rest of you, Persona 3 FES is one of the best RPGs the PS2 has ever received, and one of the console's proudest moments period.

"This is not merely a fabulous game made better, it is a love letter from Atlus..."

Staying on Yukari's good side probably doesn't involve making her wear a swimsuit to battle...

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 FES — score 10

+	Thirty American dollars for one of the best RPGs money can buy.
–	I swear, Atlus... if I don't get Persona 4, I'll die.

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Atlus
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	1 player
ESRB Rating	Mature
Available	April

ArcanaHeart

A lot of arcana, not enough heart

words Eric L. Patterson

It was through my close friend Maurice that I developed a love for a little niche Sega Saturn 2D fighter called Asuka 120% Limited Burning Fest. Asuka was an all-female fighting game made by a company you've never heard of and with looks that seemed cheap and amateurish compared to the various Capcom or SNK releases of the same time period. And yet, Asuka was something special and magical in our hands, as we sunk in the time and effort to really understand the game and appreciate everything it had to offer.

In many ways, playing Arcana Heart reminds me of those hours we spent in Asuka with my Karina going up against Maurice's Cathy. Both have a bit of an image problem; while I certainly wouldn't call Arcana Heart ugly by any means, at a time when Arc System Works and SNK are racing to move sprite-based fighters into the world of high definition, looks aren't going to be what sells this game to people. And again, like Asuka, Arcana Heart holds one important requirement before it can truly be enjoyed: a second player.

More precisely, an equally-skilled human being, sitting in the room next to you, conveniently in range of your voice so that they can hear the smack talk coming from your lips after you've just beat the holy hell out of them via an insane string of combos. The game engine here isn't about strategic maneuvering or a delicate balance of back and forth, it's about video-worthly matches between you and a friend, and while Arcana certainly *can* be played single player, *should* it is a whole different matter.

"Arcana Heart holds one important requirement before it can truly be enjoyed: a second player."

All this is amplified by two very interesting options Examu has built into the game. The first is a homing system, where pressing and holding X will send you racing at your opponent no matter where they may be at the time. Arcana's gameplay feels terribly slow until you start to get the hang of this resource, but once you do, the opportunities provided for rushes and pop-ups are plentiful and pleasing. The bigger and more game-defining element is the selectable pre-set lists of additional special moves and bonus abilities known as "arcana." Characters and arcana can be mixed and matched, giving the game an added level of depth, one which helps keep players from getting too comfortable with what each fighter can potentially dish out.

Unfortunately, Arcana Heart then falls short in its attempt to become a major player in the fighting game scene. Games like this live or die by their cast, and while Arcana's isn't a total wash, it's also not what it needs to be. For every character choice who is genuinely interesting both in design and roster of moves, there's another who feels under-developed and lacking. Arcana's painfully small selection of fighters wouldn't feel so small if this issue weren't present, but it is, so it does. As a result, Arcana Heart is the type of game where you find your one or two regulars and spend time perfecting them, instead of picking and playing the entire roster when you need a change of pace.

Arcana Heart

score **7.0**

+	Two words: Lieselotte Achenbach.
–	One of the most interesting character designs is an 11 year old in a swimsuit.

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Examu
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	1-2 Player
ESRB Rating	T
Available	April 2008

Gran Turismo 5: Prologue

score 8.5

What is pasr is prologue

words Michael Hobbs

System(s)	PS3	**Multi**	Online play and content
Developer	Polyphony Digital	**Available**	April
Publisher	SCEA	**ESRB Rating**	E

It must be my personality, but when I see the cars in Gran Turismo 5 Prologue and marvel at their detail and accuracy, I just feel bad. I feel bad for the artists and coders that have obviously poured their hearts into making these machines the real deal in appearance. This has to be a labor of love.

So the 70+ cars in the US release of GT5 Prologue are all one could hope for in detail (notably including the Ferrari F2007). The same goes for the six courses, which sometimes surprise with the sensations of realism they produce.

Great achievements both, and along with the updated physics engine, are pretty much worth the price of admission. The game itself is a little less consistently great as it straddles the line between full-fledged game and the world's most elaborate demo. Some of the racing challenges miss, but you've got to get through them if you want to reach A class and car customization.

Overall though, the game's awesome. Of course. We only wish we could have tried the myriad online features.

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas 2

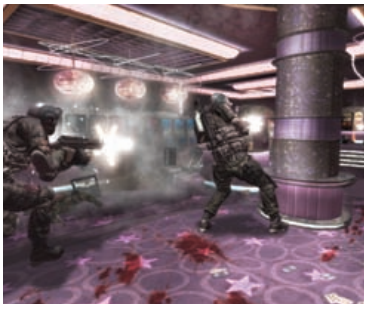
score 8.0

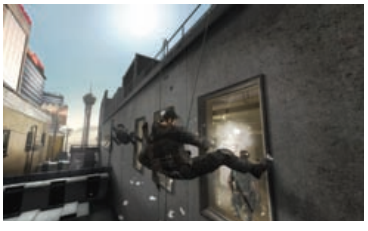
Almost Sinsational

words Greg Orlando

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC	**Multi**	Single / Co-Op / Multiplayer Online
Developer	Ubisoft	**Available**	Xbox 360 & PS3: March 20 / PC: April 15
Publisher	Ubisoft	**ESRB Rating**	M

Ubisoft lets players customize their hero before making Sin City safe for loose slots one dead terrorist at a time. Vegas 2 is more of the same, to be sure, complete with many of the same knocks on its predecessor. Artificial intelligence controlled allies still jump the gun and give away their position and oftentimes fail to take cover when directed to do so. But, man, viva co-op and online play.





Silent Hill Origins

score 7.0

Every town has its secrets...

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	PS2	**Multi**	N/A
Developer	Climax	**Available**	March
Publisher	Konami	**ESRB Rating**	M

Scaling up from a PSP to a nice big TV isn't quite as welcome as you might want it to be, because Silent Hill Origins looks like something that, well, roughly scaled up from a PSP to a nice big TV. (Especially rough if you've got an HDTV.) Comparisons aside, this welcome installment in the Silent Hill is more capable as a game on its own terms than any return to the days when Silent Hill chilled with its bizarre dread. This series has stumbled the last few times, but in some ways Silent Hill Origins is a better made game than Silent Hill: The Room, offering more satisfying combat and a stronger game structure that delivers a higher level of engagement. For 30 bucks, the capable haunts here are worth this house of horrors.

Either you get it.

As Seen on The Tonight Show and Conan O'Brien

Or you don't.

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Final Fantasy Tactics A2
Grimoire of the Rift

The latest entry in the Ivalice Alliance series...

words Heather Campbell

Square really knows how to polish a title. Whether it be the clean, charming character design work of Ryoma Ito, or the whimsical melodies or Hitoshi Sakimoto, Tactics A2 just rings so pleasantly. The fonts are easy to read, the layout is intuitive. Even the menus have this appealing color gradient at their edges. You have to imagine that there are board meetings where these developers seriously argue over the tone of selection chimes.

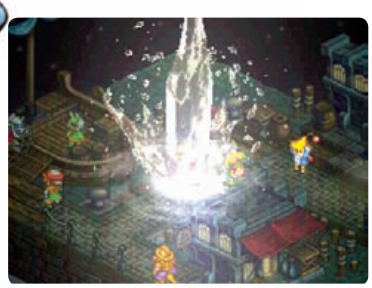
Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift is another entry into the Ivalice Alliance series of games, which as I've said before is quickly becoming the default Final Fantasy world. With FFXII, XII: Revenant Wings, Tactics, Tactics Advance, and now A2… well, there's only one other world Square has developed more in the last twenty years, and that's VII's Midgar. Of the two, I'd rather visit the bright and appealing Ivalice.

I'm ashamed to admit this, but after ten years of tactical role-playing games, it was Final Fantasy Tactics Advance that finally got me into the genre. Fans of the GBA original will be very impressed with

"…the speed at which the battles move is much more satisfying."

Luso

Hashmal sights his prey (right) while (below) a giddy youth makes plans for the summer.



the decisions in A2. The music has been re-orchestrated to take advantage of the DS' larger instrument set, but themes and melodies from the first game are still intact and beautiful. Sure, the game retains the forced perspective of the original game, but the speed at which the battles move is much more satisfying. That was my biggest complaint about the first title; it was so slow. Now, things click along at a rapid clip.

So, how does our hero arrive in Ivalice? Luso is a young, mischievous boy who graffitis an old library book with his own name. (No matter how many times I do this, I don't get sucked into an alternate dimension, but there it is.) Without hesitation, he joins a clan out on the hunt for a mark, and soon he's the ragged little leader of the group—which is what any of us would do if we were suddenly given a sword and a new pair of armored threads.

Now, if you'll recall, the story of Tactics Advance was pretty melancholy at times. So far, none of that sadness has been uncovered in A2. The haunting, difficult story has been transformed into something more adventurous and embraceable. Some fans will balk, but we don't need everything that comes out of Square to be brooding and emo.

Look forward to the huge number of Jobs, touch-screen interactivity (which was not included in the Japanese edition), and cameos from FFXII mainstays Vaan and Penelo.

And this is the very grimoire of note —

Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift — preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Available	June 24, 2008

Adel

The World Ends With You

Fashion, Cellphones, Hip-Hoppu, Tokyo 2000!

words Heather Campbell

I'm going to skip my traditionally lengthy intro to get right at this game. The World Ends With You is the latest original I.P. from Square Enix's Kingdom Hearts team (with input from Jupiter). It features character designs and conceptual work by love-him-or-hate-him S-E superman Tetsuya Nomura (the guy who drew Cloud and made Kingdom Hearts), and is all set to a hip-hop, techno score by current S-E composer Takeharu Ishimoto (Crisis Core). The game takes place in a neighborhood in Tokyo called Shibuya, which is known for its urban fashion, nightclubs, cellphone culture, and giant cross-walks.

Shibuya is where *Lost in Translation* was set.

Shibuya is where lounge met bossa-nova, and poured out in French grooves as Pizzicato Five laid down their music in the '90s.

Shibuya is one of those places that still manages to influence fashion, despite hitting a popular peak at the turn of the millennium.

Setting a game in Shibuya is a big choice. Shibuya is the heart-beat of The World Ends With You. An action game with role-playing elements, where trends in fashion are integral to character growth, TWEWY is, I believe, attempting to translate the self-important, isolating experience of being a Tokyo youth into a game. This is how naïve fashion magazines see Shibuya crossing—as an intersection of cutting-edge cliques, instead of the tourist attraction it has become.

You are the lonely, headphone-wearing Neku Sakuraba, who wakes up in Shibuya crossing with heavy amnesia. Neku meets the gangly fashionista Shiki Misaki, and bonds with her to battle Reapers—a mysterious organization of villains who use monsters called Noise to prevent our heroes from accomplishing their daily goals. Battle takes place *simultaneously* on both screens, with the stylus controlling Neku, and the d-pad relegated to Shiki. The overwhelming amount of input it takes to clear a battle seems like an attempt to turn the noise of cell-phones, traffic, and insecurity into a game-concept. Shiki begins her fights by playing with her phone, as if to cue us in on the idea.

There is so much crammed into this game, and like the Shibuya culture it's based on, it makes no attempt at letting outsiders into the world. Let's see: Neku is a psychic, who can read the (frequently) mundane thoughts of the crowd by focusing and then pausing time. Abilities are assigned to pins (called Badges in the Japanese edition), which are literally buttons your character wears that bestow magical powers. The game even levels up when it's turned off, suggesting that Shibuya never stops… even when it's crammed into your DS.

This is going to be a polarizing title. I love it, even though it's off-putting at times. I'd rather have a million original little games like The World Ends With You than another sequel to a game we've already played. I celebrate this game, and congratulate Square for having the courage to localize a piece that is so thoroughly Japanese. We should all pick up a copy to give them the right idea.

> "The game even levels up when it's turned off, suggesting that Shibuya never stops."

The World Ends With You — score 9.0

+	Fascinating, academically challenging title that wants to pretend it's less
–	Music can get a little grating.

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Square Enix / Jupiter
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	N/A
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	April 22

FlatOut: Head On

score 7.0

System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Empire Interactive	Available	March
Publisher	Warner Bros.	ESRB Rating	T

Hardcore racing simulations have never excited me that much. My money is on taking a vehicle and wrecking it and every other moving, and non-moving, vehicle and object in its path. Put guns on the car and it gets even better. Flatout: Head On may not contain guns, but who needs guns when you get plenty of explosive destruction by simply crashing your ride into oblivion. The goal: purchase a vehicle, race it, increase earnings, make it a better carnage machine and do it all again. This is the kind of game your nongaming friend/significant other looks at over your shoulder and says "games are dumb." At which point you say, "But look, the graphics are pretty slick for the PSP, the cars control with a loose, appealing edge, and wrecking into stuff, not to mention screwing around with the minigames, is kind of a rush!" **Brady Fiechter**

Wild Arms XF

score 8.5

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1 Player
Developer	Media Vision	Available	March 2008
Publisher	XSEED	ESRB Rating	E 10+

If you're a strategy RPG fan, please don't let some of the other reviews for Wild Arms XF floating around out there scare you off. This is a game crafted and polished to a surprising degree, from the beautiful graphics and music to the distinct selection of character classes available to you. Then there are the battles themselves: each challenge is unique and different from one another, replacing the "battle fatigue" that crops up in many an SRPG with a sense of excitement to see what's next.

Sure, there are a few missteps–I can't say I'm in love with the Vitality Point idea in its current form–but no, a level of challenge that doesn't let you waltz through the game isn't one of them. **Eric L. Patterson**

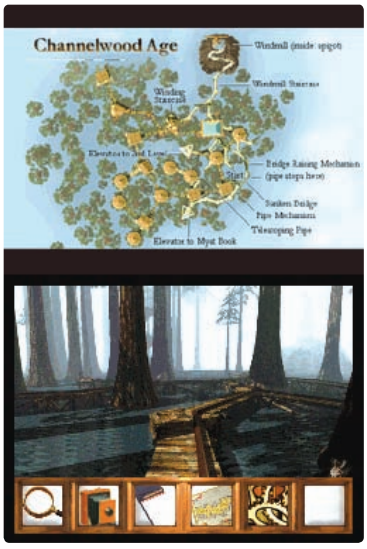
Myst DS

score 2.5

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Hoplite Research	Available	May
Publisher	Empire Interactive	ESRB Rating	E

Released in 1993, Myst was a groundbreaking mixture of HyperCard, rendered images, carefully placed video clips, and some slick programming tricks. The result was a breathtaking adventure into puzzles of logic, one that pushed gaming forward while racking up millions of copies sold.

Almost 15 years later, Myst is a game whose time has come and gone in this form, a relic of an era gone by that is now too clunky and plodding to be able to provide the same enjoyment it once gave so many. What potential it still may hold is then nearly erased by a slipshod port to the DS and the realization that, on a screen this physically small, solving puzzles that rely so heavily on visual clues is an exercise in frustration. **Eric L. Patterson**



BangaiO Spirits

preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Treasure	Available	May
Publisher	D3	ESRB Rating	Rating Pending

The genre we lovingly brand as "the shooter," is called so for a reason, which you can see in full effect in the master of the genre's BangaiO Spirits, a game in which you shoot enough bullets off to rival an entire war. Treasure's original BangaiO played out on the Dreamcast, and in this full-fledged sequel, while the levels are more compact, the action is familiar and as intense. The BangaiO mech is a crazy shooting machine most of the time, but throughout the 150 or so levels, some slower-paced puzzle areas provide a taxing reprieve. Weapon choice is crucial: grab the bat and you can switch on the fly to knock back enemy fire. And as a side note: level data can be transferred to another DS through sound files. **Brady Fiechter**

Jake Hunter: Detective Chronicles

preview

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Workjam	**Available**	Summer 2008
Publisher	Aksys Games	**ESRB Rating**	Rating Pending

It seems appropriate that Jake Hunter, private eye, has exceedingly big hair. An excessive coiffure is perhaps a prerequisite for any investigator who takes on murder cases via the Nintendo DS.

Hunter is a man's man, a man of few words and absolutely no catchphrases. He's the star of his eponymous mystery adventure, a man who must solve two murders and a missing-persons case.

Detective Chronicles will seem familiar to anyone who's stepped into the courtroom with a certain ace attorney. Hunter's days are spent plodding from one place to another, gathering evidence, and talking to witnesses. Each day's investigation is concluded with a wrap-up of sorts; Hunter, in a very non-politically correct move, lights up a cigarette and pores over the information he's discovered. Players are quizzed on character's names, clues, and locations, and it's necessary to answer the questions correctly in order to move on.

Hunter, to its credit, throws in some neat twists. At one point, a group of toughs begins following the detective. Hunter must first identify his pursuers by ducking and weaving into stores, all the while being careful not to scare them off. Then, he must lure the bad guys into a trap; here, the game offers text-based fighting options, with Hunter able to throw and dodge punches, and offer a beatdown known as the "Jake Special."

The Detective Chronicles, complete with three hard-boiled cases, will arrive on the Nintendo DS come summer. And remember, kids, smoking is bad for you. **Greg Orlando**

Super Dodgeball Brawlers

score 8.5

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-8
Developer	Arc System Works	**Available**	May
Publisher	Aksys Games	**ESRB Rating**	Rating Pending

From the moment I saw screenshots for Super Dodgeball Brawlers, they put a smile on my face and a warm feeling in my heart. This is probably the best overall iteration of the Nekketsu Dodgeball series to be released, packed with loads of depth in both character and gameplay options. Team customization returns, as you find the perfect mix of each member's strengths, weaknesses, special skills, and looks... which, thank the lord, are back to the classic Kunio style.

The game itself–that timeless battle of smacking the crap out of an opposing team with a ball–has a few new tricks up its sleeve as well. You can keep things more old-school, or you can infuse a bit of River City Ransom-esque flavor with items, weapons, and even the ability to kick and punch opponents square in the jaw. The new "Brawl" mode is an equally enjoyable all-out, no-boundaries dodgeball war, and up to eight players can jump into either style of match all via a single copy of the game.

This is damn near as good a version of Dodgeball as I could ask for... if only overall character speed could be tweaked. **Eric L. Patterson**

"This is probably the best overall iteration of the Nekketsu Dodgeball series to be released."

Dodgeball brawlers indeed, then.

play magazine presents

xxxxxx

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Ryu ga Gotoku: KENZAN!

Sega does in one year what Square, Konami and Capcom couldn't in three

words Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe

Many thought Sega's exquisitely bronzed Toshihiro Nagoshi mad when he dropped $20 million on what was essentially "Shenmue with Yakuza" in 2005–the original Ryu ga Gotoku/Yakuza. They were silenced when the series went on to sell two million copies, became adapted for the screen by Takashi Miike, and racked up licenses for everything from instant yakisoba to high-end silver jewelry. The series is now back on PlayStation 3, having undergone a makeover almost as startling as its producer's...but with only 14 months of development time and a largely unchanged gameplay model, can Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! hope to compete in 2008? Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe discuss.

Casey Loe: I had high hopes for Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! (perhaps to be known as Yakuza 3 in the US), but I never expected anything like this. I figured it would be more of a quirky spin-off, sort of a next-gen experiment to get Sega's R&D 1 team up to speed on the PlayStation 3 before they make a real modern-day Ryu ga Gotoku 3. After all, half the PS3 games that were originally announced by Japanese developers way back in 2005 have still yet to materialize in any playable form, so it seemed impossible that a game of true Ryu ga Gotoku scale could be announced in September and released in March.

But if anything, Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! is the most ambitious game in the series yet, and astonishingly, also the most polished. This isn't the first good next-gen game to come out of Japan, but is the first that has felt completely finished—As good as Devil May Cry 4 and Lost Odyssey were, they clearly would have been a lot better if their teams had an extra six months of development time. But Kenzan is a more ambitious game than either of those and feels utterly complete. I never thought I'd say this in a million years, but between this and Valkyria Chronicles, Sega is suddenly one of a very tiny number of Japanese companies who has their next-gen shit together.

Nick Des Barres: You have just spoken God's own truth. In many ways...nah, in almost every conceivable way, RGG:K! is the single most mature "next-gen" software title to come out of Japan yet. This can't be stressed enough–here's a game that went from announcement to release in what seems the blink of an eye, given that we've been waiting two and three years for the equivalents from other companies. And yet, it is burnished to a fine sheen, feeling like a game from very late in a console's lifespan. For one thing, you can expect it to take 40, 50 or more hours to beat (depending on how deep you want to dig into its dozens of esoteric minigames and sidequests). That's an impressive feat for what is essentially an action-adventure game, and the only other Japanese games that can compare in terms of content are the RPGs Blue Dragon and Lost Odyssey. But what do you say to the challenge that RGG:K! is nothing more than a complete retread of the formula that was already feeling tired in the as-yet Japan-only Yakuza 2, and thus not fit for praise?

Casey: That's a perfectly valid complaint, but the more I play, the more I don't care. To be fair, Yakuza 2 was a quick-turnaround sequel that made no apologies for reusing all of Yakuza 1's assets, while Kenzan! makes scores of improvements over its predecessors. You can now freely move the camera, there are three new sword-focused combat styles, the game world is larger and more diverse, the loading times have been greatly reduced (thanks to an optional 10-minute HD install), and there are tons of cool new systems and an ungodly amount of

Kazumanosuke Kiryu

sidequests and minigames. But it is a little disappointing that the process of romancing 17th century *oiran* (think geisha) is so similar to the process of romancing 21st century hostess-club girls, and that hero Kiryu is still constantly beset by bumbling drunks challenging him to pointless random-encounter-style battles around every corner.

The game may make only modest improvements to the Yakuza formula, but the free camera and the radical change in scenery, immerse you in the game like never before. Kenzan!'s 17th century setting is a fascinating place, featuring not just the hub city of Gion, but teeming slums and quaint villages, and all sorts of beautiful forests, beaches, and mountain trails. The Yakuza series is often compared to Sega's classic Shenmue, but Kenzan! is much closer to it than its predecessors ever were. Japan has a fascinating history—not just to japanophiles like us, but to anyone who's read Memoirs of a Geisha or enjoyed a Kurosawa film. And Kenzan! puts you right in the heart of a number of fascinating political and cultural movements, setting the game in a legendary city of sin where children sell themselves into lives of sexual slavery, political figures plot intrigue to consolidate their power, and pinwheels and chili peppers are the technical marvels of the day. Of course, unlike Shenmue, you get to experience it all through the eyes of the greatest badass who ever lived. That's the way to relive history.

Nick: Please understand it wasn't my complaint, just a complaint that detractors seem to enjoy making. To be completely fair, RGG:K! does sport more enhancements to its core engine than, say, Devil May Cry 4 did compared to 3. The series' gameplay experience always worked, and producer/director Toshihiro Nagoshi knows it. There's little point in drastically changing it yet, in any case–the series is only two and half years old. Instead, the magic he has wrought here is a transformation as radical as Resident Evil 4's legendary "full model change", though involving actual gameplay only peripherally. RGG:K! recasts most of the first game's key roles as new characters, most notably ultra-badass protagonist Kazuma Kiryu as historical folk samurai hero Musashi Miyamoto. A good cultural analogue does not exist, but I'd like to ask our readers to imagine a Gears of War 3 with Marcus Fenix flung 800 years into the past, playing the part of Robin Hood. It's that absurd, and yet scrupulous attention paid to the (patchy) documentation concerning Musashi's actual life and the Warring States period of Japan's history in general means it never feels cheap or gimmicky. The fiction it surgically grafts onto the historical record is sensational, at once playing with expectations the player will have about characters based on their experiences with them in the previous two games, and what every Japanese knows about Musashi's legendary feats and duels. Take the key character of Haruka, for example, a preteen girl who came unbidden to modern-day Kiryu's stomping grounds in the original game seeking help. She at first appears to be playing the same role here, though within minutes is selling herself into a life of prostitution so that she might be able to pay Kiryu to murder the man she believes killed her family–Musashi Miyamoto. It's a torrid tale and impeccably well-presented, with what I must stand up and declare to be the finest realtime event scenes ever built out of triangles. And that's another thing–isn't this game ungodly pretty?

> "In almost every way, RGG:K! is the most mature 'next-gen' game to come out of Japan yet."

Casey: Yeah, I'm with you 100%. There is a ton of story in this game, and the spectacular character modeling, A-list voice and motion-capture acting and extremely strong writing kept it popping off the screen. This is the first game in the series not to be written by crime novelist Seishu Hase, but whoever has taken over from him retains his

> "I had high hopes for Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan!, but I never expected anything like this."

knack for writing tons of cool action scenes into the plot without theme ever feeling contrived. Kenzan! is a pot-boiler through and through, but it also has the most open-world elements of the series, and you can easily spend dozens of enjoyable hours romancing whores, saving random villagers from peril, and learning new moves by studying the majesty of nature.

Unfortunately, the combination open-world gameplay and the historically-rooted story will present importers with the challenge of a lifetime. This game is tough to play and impossible to appreciate without a strong command of Japanese. (And don't think you can pause to look things up—there's no pausing event scenes.) Sega of America has been dicking around with Yakuza 2 for well over a year, so God only knows how long it will take them to get around to localizing this one, which probably has twice as much text and several mini-games that are simply incomprehensible to westerners. Alas, non-Japanese speakers are at Sega of America's mercy again.

Nick: I have no doubt RGG:K! will eventually be blessed with a US release–it simply cost too much money to stay in Japan. RGG:K! will be a localization nightmare to be sure, but I pray the game makes it through the process relatively unscathed. If Sega USA absolutely must graft on hamfisted English voice acting, please keep the Japanese as an option. These are all top-flight film and television actors; to remove their performances from the product would be a hideous disservice. In any case, the time seems right to sum up. I'm of the opinion that RGG:K! is the best game made in Japan since Final Fantasy XII, though I know you don't share my feelings about that particular piece of software. I feel right awarding RGG:K! a perfect ten, but it does have its flaws, which we would be remiss not to mention. As you have said, the most egregious problems with the series have been almost completely remedied, but its menus remain a chore to navigate, with key information buried layers deep. Also niggling is the availability

"You can now freely move the camera, the game world is larger and more diverse, the loading times have been greatly reduced, and there are an ungodly amount of sidequests and minigames."

Although the full compliment of hand-to-hand moves from the first two games in the series are available, Kenzan! adds three new blade styles: one-handed katana, dual wield katana, and the giant nodachi seen here.

"We played all our cards [on RGG:K!]. We always try to make our games a '100', but this project finally became a '150'."
– eminently *oshare*geous Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! director/producer, Toshihiro Nagoshi

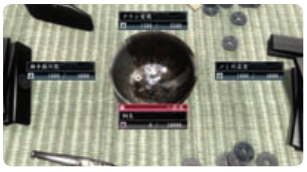
of sidequests; some are only accessible during one chapter, others only at a certain time of day, yet there is no way to advance the clock except to proceed with the story. Your completion percentages do carry over to the second playthrough, but this is my largest issue with which what is otherwise a completely unassailable game. It may not be for everyone, but for those who appreciate a lengthy action-adventure in the Shenmue mold, it gets no better than this. Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan! is the second true masterpiece on PlayStation 3 after Uncharted, and I can't wait to see what happens with the English version...

Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan!	Score 10
+	Delirious visuals, lengthy quest, crispy battles, free time machine bound for 17th Century Japan included
–	Unfriendly menus, random battles can occasionally be irksome
System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Sega
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	Now (Japan), Unannounced US

"I'm of the opinion that RGG:K! is the best game made in Japan since Final Fantasy XII."

The RGG:K! Minigames

The RGG series has always been famous for its absurd numbers of minigames and sidequests, but Kenzan! stretches the concept to well-nigh unthinkable levels. In addition to no less than one hundred optional sub-events, there are countless ways to gamble away your *ryo*, ranging from simple dice games to *hanafuda* cards, shogi and mahjongg. This is only the beginning, however; you'll be playing all manner of obscure Edo-era *zashiki-asobi* (literally, parlor games) with the courtesans you buy, along with horseback archery, shuriken-tossing and many, many other combat-based minigames. None is strictly required to advance through the story, but each invariably yields up a Zelda-esque reward for the best scores.



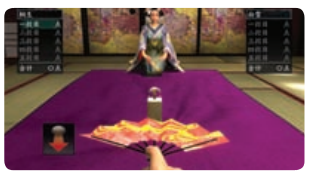
Chinchirorin

Karuta

Konpira

Shogi

Tokkuri



Tosen

Turtle Racing

Yabusame

Soma Bringer

Soma brings plenty for three, but not quite enough for one.

words Nick Des Barres

Monolith Software is most famous for the Baten Kaitos and Xenosaga series, which took risks with the RPG genre that paid off with critical acclaim but little commercial success. Soma Bringer, their first effort for their new bosses at Nintendo, plays it safe by sticking close to the established archetype of randomized, character-focused action-RPGs like Diablo and Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance. That's a genre that is typically built around co-op play, and Soma Bringer, alas, is no exception. Since online play is not supported, you won't be able to fully appreciate it unless you can convince nearby friends to buy their own copies for wireless play. But even those who are stuck playing it solo may find that the exceptional soundtrack by Chrono-series composer Yasunori Mitsuda and the unique world crafted by the writers of Xenogears provide just enough of the Monolith magic to make up for Soma Bringer's tiresome single-player gameplay.

Unlike many games in the genre, Soma Bringer does have a vast and engaging quest, instead of the usual hub town and series of dungeons. The game's six acts each take place in a different region with multiple large contiguous areas, some of which are open to free exploration or are involved only in optional side quests. A lot of time has been spent on the story (too much, some might argue), which tells the tale of your band of heroes' attempts to fight off an invasion of mysterious "Visitors" that can possess wild creature and turn them hostile. In the grand Xenogears tradition, the story has lots of lengthy diversions that add little to the plot, but do provide texture to the game's world and personality to the game's large cast of heroes.

Visually, Soma Bringer is a paradox. The game has lovely hand-drawn environments that are reminiscent of classic titles like Secret of Mana. But if you zoom in on the action, the 3D characters scale smoothly while the environments degenerate into a mess of blown-out pixels. Seeing the action up close is important to melee characters who use a lot of combos and short-range attacks, so strangely, Soma Bringer is an ugly game if you choose a fighter and a pretty one if you choose an archer or mage. There is no paradox in the soundtrack, though—this is Yasunori Mitsuda's finest work since Xenosaga and the Chrono series. The tracks are beautifully composed, abundant enough to fill a three-disc soundtrack, and long enough not to get tiresome in lengthy areas. Through some voodoo magic, they actually sound really good through the DS's speakers, too. Soma Bringer is almost worth playing for the music alone.

I liked Soma Bringer, but I would have liked it a whole lot more if Monolith had focused less on the wireless multiplayer and more on the single-player experience. Maybe a million Japanese high-school students do get together to play Monster Hunter every day, but no other game has ever caught fire in a similar way, so basing Soma Bringer on the assumption that most players would convince their friends to buy their own copies and meet-up to quest together strikes me as overly optimistic. Since the game's mechanics have been evenly divided between the six selectable character classes, you'll end up getting bored with the limited move selection of whichever one you choose pretty quickly. It's also frustrating to constantly be finding great loot you can't wield effectively—if you choose a character class with only one or two weapon specialties, you'll often play for hours without finding any usable pick-ups. The most infuriating part is that if you aren't playing with friends, you have two NPC companions who follow you constantly, but you can't ever take control of them, choose their moves, or give them the class-specific loot that you find. If the designers had simply allowed you to make a party of three and switch between the characters, the game would stay fun for a whole lot longer. But I suppose a fully satisfying single-player game wouldn't give purchasers enough motivation to cajole their friends into buying their own copies so they would have someone to play and trade items with. Lame.

"Soma Bringer is almost worth playing for the music alone."

A localization of Soma Bringer could fare quite well if real online play and voice chat were added for western markets. But it would also fare well if the box was packed with $100 bills, and that's looking just about as likely; Nintendo seems to hate their own "hardcore" games so much that they will neither localize them nor license them to other companies for a US release. Importers without Japanese language skills should be able to get through Soma Bringer without too much trouble, but without other people to play with, they'll have to be content with the monotonous experience of soloing through a game that was clearly built around co-op play.

Soma Bringer score **7.0**

+	Add a point if you're playing with friends
–	Subtract a point if you're going it alone

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Monolith Software
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	Wireless multiplayer
Available	Now (Japan)

The Legend of KAGE 2

People will hate you, Steve, if you're too cagey

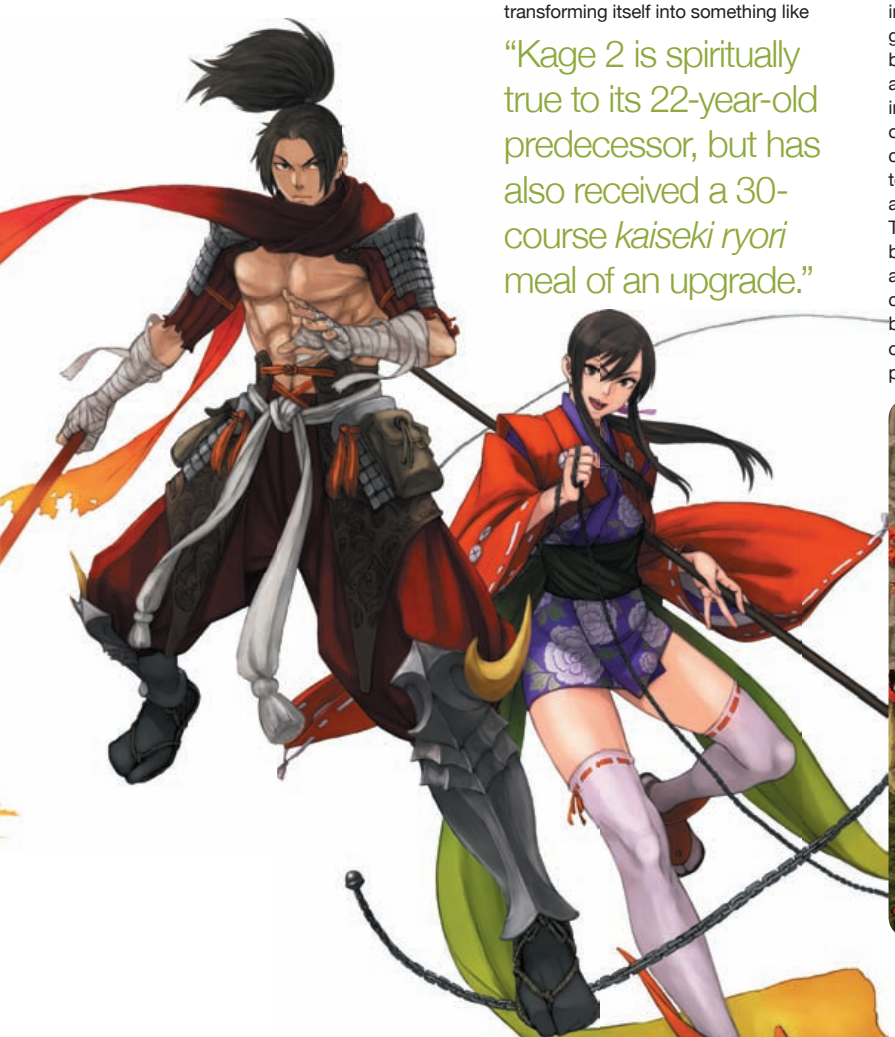
words Nick Des Barres

There are some sequels a sane man never expects to play. Crystalis 2. Shenmue 3. A new Chrono. And, I would have sworn to God, The Legend of Kage 2...yet here it is, like some fever dream from another dimension. It is not an unqualified masterpiece, but then again, neither was the original. Rather, Kage 2 is simply a rock-solid 2-D ninja action game like those of yore–Ninja Gaiden, Shadow of the Ninja, and Shinobi, albeit two decades on. And that's a totally awesome thing.

You will immediately notice that Kage 2 is not up to the 2-D par established by numerous other DS games, the closest comparison probably being Contra 4. It does not matter. Eschewing the linear and restrictive layouts that prettier games by necessity demand, Kage 2 instead opts for relatively simple, interchangeable tiles that allow for truly gigantic levels built around obscene verticality. That was the original 1986 Legend of Kage's hook–mile-high jumps with stages that almost seemed to be as high as they were long. This DS sequel takes the concept even further, using the system's inherently vertical screen layout to brilliant effect. Although you can never "reach" the top screen, it serves to preview what lies above, a boon for a game that emphasizes three-screen-high leaps and stages so massive one can literally become lost in them. Projectiles can be launched to dispatch enemy ninja lurking on the top screen, and the dual setup is cleverly used for boss patterns and gimmicks that would be impossible at a standard screen ratio.

Although Kage 2 is spiritually true to its 22-year-old predecessor (the famous jumps, a short-range blade, long-range shuriken, the goal of rescuing princess Kirihime), it has also received a 30-course *kaiseki ryori* meal of an upgrade, transforming itself into something like a fusion between a traditional stage-clear action game and one of IGA's "Metroidvanias". Two characters are selectable, each with their own storylines (though the stages they traverse are identical): Original hero Kage, and the kusarigama-wielding kunoichi newcomer Chihiro. Kage has a longer life bar and screen-spanning shuriken; Chihiro has a longer magic bar and a more powerful close-range attack, but a much shorter long-range one. Clearing stages with high ratings nets new abilities, Metroid-style, such as multiple new attacks, a slide, and extensions to existing abilities like higher jump distance, increased attack range and shuriken count. Indeed, the roster of new moves learned as you progress is so vast that the game seems almost as simplistic as its forbear during the early stages.

"Kage 2 is spiritually true to its 22-year-old predecessor, but has also received a 30-course *kaiseki ryori* meal of an upgrade."



The action is wonderfully 20th Century, but Kage 2's most impressive feature is its ingenious ninjutsu system. Clearly informed by Final Fantasy VII's stroke-of-genius Materia System, jutsu are created by arranging orbs of four different colors on a grid with the stylus. Color combinations in the shape of a triangle allow Kage or Chihiro to use jutsu–a broad range comprising elemental attacks, projectiles, temporary attribute power ups, healing, and Ryu Hayabusa-style shadow copies. There are 40 jutsu in all, but like FFVII you begin with only a limited number of orbs and must collect more as you play. The catch is that the board is of a limited size, but depending on judicious placement one can simultaneously use up to five low-powered (but varied) jutsu, or opt for more powerful ones that come at the cost of only being able to wield two or three. It's a smart little idea, and elevates Kage 2 from mere decency into something special.

The Legend of Kage 2 puts the DS's dual screens to innovative use, facilitating the multiple-screen-high jumps for which the original game was famous.

The Legend of Kage 2 is not a game for all time, but is about as good as one could expect a sequel to the venerable original to get. It's a decent length for a portable game (six to ten hours per character, depending on how much exploring and replaying of stages you do for better ranks), has a surprisingly extensive gallery mode showcasing beautiful character artwork and development sketches, and sports a trademark poppy soundtrack from Taito's celebrated sound team Zuntata that is *blisteringly* rad. As a big fan of the original–The Legend of Kage was a large part of a particularly unhealthy fascination with ninjas when I had when I was a wee lad–I couldn't ask for anything more.

The Legend of Kage 2 — score **7.0**

+	Crunchy controls, brilliant magic system, glorious Zuntata soundtrack
–	Main quest is somewhat short, graphics not up to DS 2-D par

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Lancarse
Publisher	Taito
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

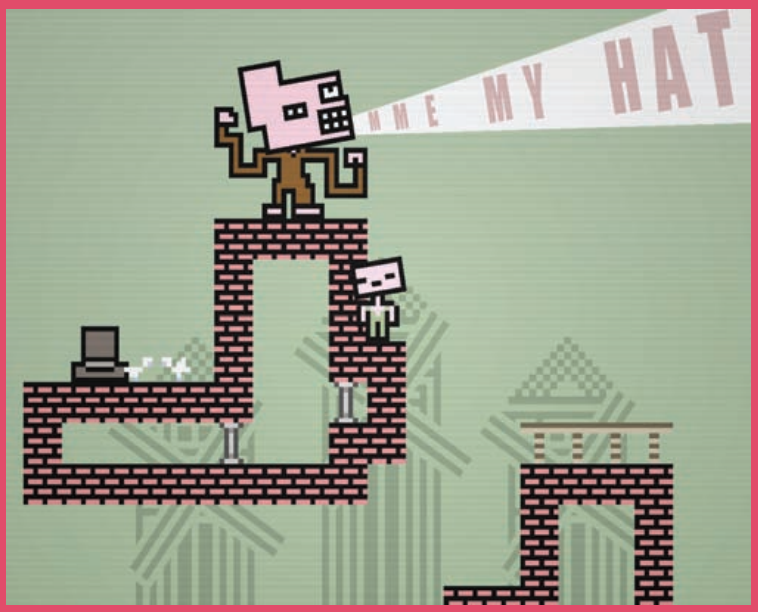
INDIE CIRCUIT

As the gifted finalists at this year's Independent Games Festival proved, the indie gaming scene has never been more vibrant or eclectic. Bright lights like Dylan Fitterer's Audiosurf (a fantastic music game that yours truly helped to get on Steam) kicked off a great 2008, as more indie teams—armed with better, more affordable development tools—see the opportunity for multiplatform exposure and profit through outlets like Xbox Live, PlayStation Store, and the aforementioned Steam. This month we investigate several new projects from rising indie game stars.

words Mike Griffin

Brain-Damaged Toon Underworld

developer Lo-Fi Minds **location** Sweden

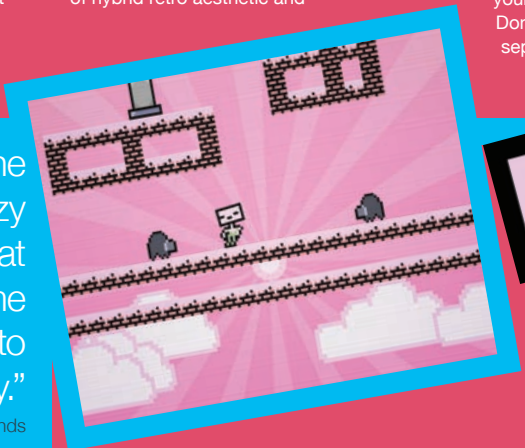


What if you hatched from a giant egg and a man claiming to be your father asked you to dance, and after you danced for him, he said he'd rather dance alone…what then? If you were Twink, the protagonist in Brain-Damaged Toon Underworld, a monster would pop out of your skull and complain. This is the bizarre and impressive first project of Lo-Fi Minds, founded by Jonatan Soderstrom (a.k.a. Cactus), creator of IGF finalist Clean Asia!, and Ville Krumlinde, programmer of the beloved 64K game assembler ZGameEditor.

Neither Jonatan nor Ville are trained artists, so they chose simplified but very specific art direction for the nasty neighborhoods in Brain-Damaged Toon Underworld. Even in the brief section of game we've played so far, the combination of hybrid retro aesthetic and contemporary polish establishes a very confident and defined style. Striking colors, nice ancillary animation (like dust clouds and scattered birds as Twink walks past), and vibrant backgrounds are merged with an atmospheric retro synth soundtrack by the talented Phlogiston (composer of 8bitpeople's classic "CyberAxe Café").

On BDTU's core platformer mechanics, Jonaton told Play: "The underworld will be a pretty large place to explore and we're giving Twink a good variety of puzzles and environmental challenges to overcome. There will be some mini-games integrated into the storyline where I can use my previous experience with shooters, but in general the game will not be very difficult gameplay-wise. Levels will likely be medium or small sized, but really numerous, and Twink will travel between them through a world map. You'll collect wood pieces that can be used to build checkpoints at any given time. There will be enemies and hazards, but generally…I'm hoping that the storyline and crazy puzzles will be what makes the game interesting and fun to play."

Despite its colorful presentation and accessible gameplay, Brain-Damaged Toon Underworld is definitely not aimed at young kids. "The game will likely feature some rather disturbing sequences of violence," Jonaton explains. "Hopefully, this will separate the game a bit from your average platform adventure." Don't worry Mr. Cactus, that separation has already occurred.



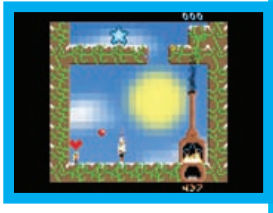
"I'm hoping that the storyline and crazy puzzles will be what makes the game interesting and fun to play."

Jonatan Soderstrom, Lo-Fi Minds

GAMES That Aspire to Be ART

Many games spend hours never achieving it, and others can accomplish it in five minutes: stirring the imagination through abstracted emotion. Rod Humble's Stars Over Half Moon Bay *(top)* is an interactive thesis about creating patterns in life, while Jason Rohrer's Gravitation *(bottom)* is a platformer about "mania, melancholia, and the creative process"—and reaching great heights when your hair catches fire.

By design, these tiny, fleeting experiences are open to all sorts of interpretation, and through their minimal, symbolic sprites and stirring soundtracks that's precisely why they succeed: by evoking a reflective and personal examination of the author's greater themes. Like the absorption of a painting or song, the game is communicated to you in minutes. A tender solace between the bloated mainstream re-treads that fill your mind with hours of soulless nonsense you'd rather forget.



Who Is TWINK?

Twink begins life as an agile, but oblivious little creature who is emotionally detached from the world. He can't speak, and he doesn't communicate his feelings. He knows two things with unflinching certainty: he must escape, and he must ascend. Twink's personality is revealed as the game progresses and he learns how to connect with the Toon Underworld's bizarre cast, seeking out a path to the Sky.

Machinarium

developer Amanita Design **location** Czech Republic

Machinarium is the next release from gifted independent developer Amanita Design, whose signature hand drawn artwork and animation was last seen in the exotic point and click 2D adventure Samorost 2. The team has grown, adventure designs are more ambitious, and the artwork is more exquisite than ever. We talked to Amanita co-founder Jakub Dvorsky about Machinarium's ongoing design.

Interview

Jakub Dvorsky, Lead Designer/Artist, Amanita Design

play: **How many people are on the Machinarium team, and how many have worked on previous Amanita games? Do you all have day jobs too?**
Jakub: When I created Samorost 1, it was just me and sound maker Tomas Dvorak.

On Samorost 2, animator Vaclav Blin also worked with us and musician Tomas Dvorak—yeah, he has exactly the same name as our sound maker, but it's a different guy. On Machinarium we also have programmer David Oliva and painters Jakub Pozar and Adolf Lachman. Machinarium is a full time job only for me and Vaclav Blin, however everyone is working hard and it takes a big part of their freelancer time.

Josef, the main robot character, is an exile from the city in Machinarium's unique organic-industrial robot world. The city is in trouble now, and he can save it. What sort of narrative techniques do you use to convey this lovely hand drawn 2D story?
The game is totally nonverbal, with characters that communicate by comic bubbles with animations and pictures. The narrative is done only by animations. Also, the main character often reminiscences about stuff, and this too is animated in comic bubbles above his head, revealing his story piece by piece. We also want really good, distinctive sounds. The sound production hasn't started yet, but we're recording a lot of strange sounds in the studio and outdoors and combining them.

What have you learned since Samorost 1 and 2 about world interaction in point and click adventure games? It's hard to strike that balance of curious ambience and fun, beatable puzzles.
Machinarium will be a little different then Samorost 1 or 2. It will remain an adventure point and clicker, but this time every action will be made through the main character, so you'll be clicking on curious things which are within his reach. The puzzles will be more logical this time and there will also be many built-in mini-games and puzzles. We'll have a lot of nice animations when the character is interacting with these objects and other characters.

You have wonderful imagination and skill in your animations. Will Josef swap parts or change shape, and will it be important for players to collect and manage items?
The robot will be slightly transformable—like his telescopic abilities—and sometimes he will alter his appearance to progress, so yes, there will be an inventory and the hero will collect stuff on the adventure. But there won't be very many objects to pick up as we want to keep the game very clear, without millions of possible combinations.

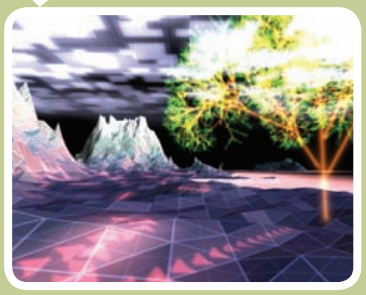
What really drives Machinarium's exploration and puzzles?
I believe the main motivations for exploration will be a lot of raw curiosity—what environments will you see next? Also the desire to reveal the whole story, solve all the puzzles, save the city, vindicate the hero, and of course successfully finish the game!

Thanks Jakub, and good luck to the Amanita team.

> "I believe the main motivations for exploration will be a lot of raw curiosity—what environments will you see next?" Jakub Dvorsky, Amanita Design

Sketchbooks for the development of the world of Machinarium—it all begins right here.

March of the Darwinians



It's time for console gamers to experience Darwinia's brilliant style and hybrid RTS gameplay in high-definition. UK-based Introversion has confirmed that both the award-winning Darwinia and its forthcoming multiplayer sibling, Multiwinia: Survival of the Flattest, will be coming to Xbox Live Arcade this fall under the moniker Darwinia+. Multiwinia will also be released separately on PC, where it is currently beta testing.

Champions Online

Calling the next generation of superheroes

words Mike Griffin

I've always admired Cryptic's efficiency. From the tight core systems and gameplay in City of Heroes, to their clockwork-like releases of free content updates and events, Cryptic runs a tight ship and respects its players. The cancellation of the next-gen Marvel Universe MMO could have dealt them a fatal blow. Instead, the ever-efficient Cryptic created the ultimate back-up plan: they sold the entire City of Heroes/Villains IP to NCsoft, then purchased the Champions IP from HERO Games—a classic superhero RPG property that originally influenced City of Heroes. And so, with Champions Online for Xbox 360 and PC, Cryptic is working within a 100% self-owned superhero IP. It's a dream come true.

The Champions universe is greatly influenced by comics of the 70s, 80s and 90s. This alternate Earth is filled with super heroes and villains, espionage, military intrigue, costumed vigilantes, police drama, renegade biotech firms, alien invaders, and Kirby-esque secret civilizations and dimensional portals. In game terms, Champions Online will have a much wider spectrum of environments than the City of X games, ranging from the ultra-modern Millennium City to sprawling outdoor areas like Devil's Head Mesa, where we find Stronghold, a maximum security supervillain prison. You'll take your hero, the result of (literally) billions of possible character building combinations, through a stylized comic world rendered in the next-gen Cryptic Engine.

We had an opportunity to chat with a few core staffers from Cryptic Studios regarding the feel and flavor of Champions Online.

Interview

Jack Emmert, Chief Creative Officer, Cryptic Studios
Bruce Rodgers, Chief Technology Officer, Cryptic Studios
Shayne Hererra, Art Development Director, Cryptic Studios

play: **Players really enjoyed the action in the City games. It felt more responsive than the typical MMO; a superior rhythm. Snaring, rooting and knockbacks had a quick, satisfying payoff. Now, with Champions Online you guys are claiming to be "The first true Action MMORPG." What's a good reference for the kind of speed you're targeting in Champions?**
Jack Emmert: Our combat is *really* fast and fun. We looked towards console super hero games for parallels, like Ultimate Alliance, X-Men Legends, Ultimate Spider Man, etcetera. There are combat combos galore throughout the game. Most are personal moves, but some super powers function very well in party concert. Cryptic worked very hard on its engine to create a game experience that matches these sorts of games…it's something pretty unheard of in the MMORPG world.

It's nice to see a MMO developer pushing the envelope on speed, as a lot more people use a better grade of internet these days. The plans for faster combat and more bandwidth-dependent actions, is this something that factored into Champions' design from the beginning?
Bruce Rodgers: Yep, for Champions Online we made a major overhaul of networking and player controls from our last MMO to take advantage of the much lower average latency that high-speed internet connections tend to have now. By doing so, we have this combat that's way more arcade-like in its responsiveness—start that attack and see your character immediately start swinging, instead of the typical MMO where it waits half a second.

Right, the usual queued-up abilities and animations; it'll be nice to get away from that. Let's talk about this visual style you've chosen for Champions Online. It's like Jet Grind Radio the MMO. Very interesting rendering; does it complicate matters for the Cryptic engine or is it a boon to performance?
Shayne Hererra: Essentially, the visual style of Champions Online is based around the concept of bringing comic books to life. So when I think comics, I think inked outlines, vibrant color, and exaggerated proportions. The exaggerated proportions and vibrant color are basic artistic style changes that the art team could manage easily enough, but getting the comic outlines to look correct proved to be a much bigger task than we expected. Our team of rendering programmers sat down with art leads to hammer out a new rendering style we named Comic Shading.

> "I would love any game that lets me make a character 8-feet tall with the muscle definition of Iggy Pop."
>
> - Jack Emmert, Chief Creative Officer, Cryptic Studios

It looks pretty outstanding, especially in high-res. How did you get the character shading style to gel with the backgrounds?
Shayne: Well, once we implemented Comic Shading across the game, I noticed we needed the characters to stand out from the environments. We decided to implement a completely separate lighting rig to make this happen. We then needed to optimize and reduce the number of shader templates to increase performance, since Comic Shading was performance heavy. What we ended up with was even higher quality than I expected; we have a beautifully rendered game running at a fantastic, consistent frame rates.

Amen—there's no point in pursuing a unique aesthetic if it doesn't play smoothly, especially since you're designing the game for Xbox 360 too. Regarding the PC and 360 versions, what sort of in-game communication—like chat, voice, guilds, guild halls, leaderboards—do you plan to provide for the game's community?
Jack: We'll have all the normal bells and whistles—like extensive chat, guild features, voice—that you'd expect in a MMORPG. Naturally, a console release means that we have additional mechanisms so that people can also communicate effectively with short button clicks. And we are planning on a number of large open world cooperative events—what super hero universe would be complete without some *huge* events to participate in alongside other heroes?!

Are we going to see more role-playing opportunities in Champions Online? I know you have the Arch Nemesis system, a great way to celebrate your avatar's alignment choices and motivations, but how about general world factions—can you sculpt a meaningful rep for your character by affiliating yourself with certain organizations?
Jack: We're working on such systems that will allow players to realize the backgrounds of their characters more fully. The Arch Nemesis system is a start, and we've got a couple of other things under way. Factions are definitely part of the Champions package; players will associate with several different fully-realized organizations in the Champions universe. As a player gets to know the Factions, he'll gain the advantages that come with it. We have worked very hard to make sure that the critters in all sorts of zones have specific motivations, in addition to cool AI, so that it isn't just vast killing fields.

So you're respecting the HERO system for many things regarding character design, but it's more about pure, glorious customization in Champions Online than it is about number crunching. In the end, is the Champions Online character creation system going to be even more expansive, in terms of musculature and all the art assets available to a character, than the City of X games?
Jack: *More expansive* doesn't even come close to defining what the character creator is like in Champions Online. We took the best parts of the CoX character creation system and expanded on them. We pushed ideas and costumes to the point of insanity, and then pulled back to our sweet spot. Imagine a character with a two-foot tall torso and five-foot long legs. Totally ridiculous! But pushing the system this far allowed us to know where the breaking point was. Now, as we dial that back a little bit, we have something truly special. Letting players choose muscle size and definition is a requirement, not an option. I would love any game that lets me make a character 8-feet tall with the muscle definition of Iggy Pop. We are trying to encourage fresh ideas while understanding what made our previous character systems so darn good. We have some incredible character creation tools and extras planned; imagine if you could customize your hero's personality, right down to your stances, your emotes, the look of your shields and powers, even your sandwiches… Umm, I guess you can tell by that last example that I'm getting hungry, so we better be heading out!

Our thanks to Jack, Bruce and Shayne for the superheroic insight into Champions Online, coming to PC and Xbox 360 in the first half of 2009.

Champions Online

preview

System(s)	PC, Xbox 360
Developer	Cryptic Studios
Publisher	Cryptic Studios
Online/Multi	Persistent online
Available	2009

With a name like Dr. Destroyer, don't expect this superhuman genius to make you breakfast in bed—unless it involves nuclear warheads, over easy. In the Champions universe circa 1992, Dr. Destroyer obliterated the city of Detroit, killing tens of thousands. Decades later, a gleaming Millennium City stands atop Detroit's ruins. Still at large, the sinister Doctor is making plans to repeat history…

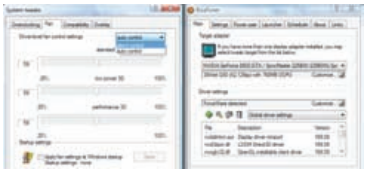
ask alienware

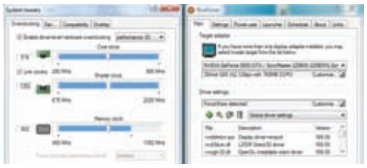
no. 022 // may 2008

In our May edition we calm the fears of a nervous potential overclocker, enter the world of modding in today's hottest game engines and editing tools, and help you decide if you're ready to try ReadyBoost.

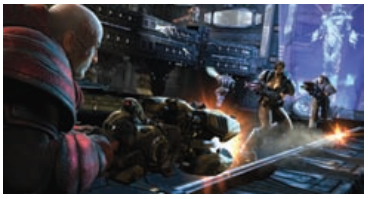
q. How much stress is added to a graphics card when you dial-up the RPM speed of the fan? I don't have water cooling, so I use an application (RivaTuner) to increase the card's fan speed. It actually keeps the card temperatures considerably lower, and that lets me overclock just a little. However, I am wondering if I'm putting some extra stress on the card's circuits or the fan parts by increasing the RPM?
Karl, CA

Alienware: Generally speaking, when you mod or alter something beyond factory specifications you decrease the lifespan of the product. By increasing your graphics card's fan speed, you make the fan rotate at RPMs which it may not have been tested for by the manufacturer's engineering team





prior to leaving the factory. Not only are you increasing your risk of component failure, you are probably voiding your warranty. We recommend purchasing cards from the various manufacturers who pre-overclock. This virtually guarantees that the card has been stress and quality tested at overclocked speeds. Manufacturers have the resources, equipment and expertise to determine a processor's highest stable output. Not only do you get a more finely tuned overclocked card, but you also eliminate the risk of blowing your graphics card and ruining the investment.



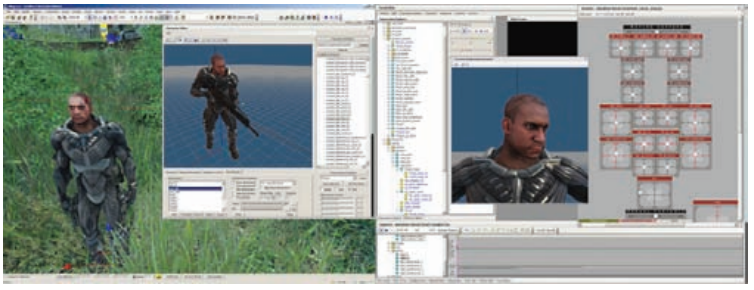
q. Having recently purchased a nice Alienware desktop (a real step up from my last rig), I'd like to try my hand at modding one of the powerful new game engines. For a gamer and pretty advanced computer user, but a total newbie to modding and level editing, how difficult is it to get to grips with editing tools in the big next-gen engines—like Unreal Engine 3 and CryEngine 2? I want to make great-looking stuff! Which game editing tools do you recommend starting with?

Alienware: Well, you've chosen the two top game engines, so that's a good start. Unreal Engine 3 is the top and also the easiest to work with. Fortunately, there is no short supply of online tutorials. Not only do members of the modding community write and post tutorials, but you even have people from Epic posting and giving pointers. You don't have to be advanced at all to get into modding. The tutorials

"Unreal Engine 3 is one of the easiest, most intuitive interfaces available for game development."

are structured for beginner, intermediate and advanced users, focusing on interior structures and outdoor structures, apply lighting, apply actions, importing models, etc. Once you understand the basics, Unreal Engine 3 is one of the easiest, most intuitive interfaces available for game development. *(Note: Alienware's Creative Director is currently using Unreal Engine 3 to create a Deathmatch map of the Alienware offices and warehouse. It should be available for download on the Alienware website in the near future!)*

As for CryEngine 2, it is also easy to navigate and create with. It's a fantastic drag and drop engine so all your changes are visible in real time. Building out the landscape is tricky at first, but once you get the hang of it you can literally build any incredible landscapes you can think off. Like the Unreal Engine 3, you will find online tutorials showing you the basic steps.



q. After a lot of searching, I'm still not convinced that ReadyBoost memory provides any major benefits in Windows Vista. It seems like most of the "ReadyBoost compatible" USB sticks out there lack the read/write speeds to be effective, and it's unclear what kind of Windows applications actually bother to use the ReadyBoost memory. Of course being a gadget junkie, I'm still holding out for that perfect ReadyBoost stick...
Phil, NY.

Alienware: You'll see the real advantage of ReadyBoost in loading times of applications such as games. Some of the newer games actually take an extremely long

time to load due to how graphically intense they are. So ReadyBoost is a perfect technology for games such as Crysis, Hellgate: London, and so on. I would suggest if you're shopping for a ReadyBoost drive, some of the newer notebooks and some of the newer desktops actually have ReadyBoost incorporated into the system internally. That prevents you from having to have some sort of external device, such as a USB card or USB key sticking out of your PC. If you do want an external device, or your current system does not have ReadyBoost built-in and you aren't looking to upgrade, make sure you get a USB 2.0 capable device. Also, make sure it has the Windows Vista logo so you know it's compatible with this technology's speed rating.

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Mythos levels up, changes class

Log into the Mythos beta these days and you really get a sense that people enjoy the game. General chat is filled with constructive hope and "What's next?" optimism. In an online RPG culture where most beta chat devolves into wars of polarization, the positive vibe in Mythos is refreshing. It's all Flagship Studios' fault; the creators of Diablo and Fate keep reinventing Mythos with every major patch. In Chapter 3, Mythos graduates from online action RPG to full-bore MMORPG.

Leading a host of additions to Mythos is the new world region of Umbral Peaks and the arrival of a fourth selectable race, the hardy Cyclopean. As lead programmer Travis Baldree told Play, the roaming one-eyed race isn't from UP, nor the new towns of Mistglade and Arcled: "…there's yet another zone coming soon that'll explore the nomadic Cyclops race, their affinity for fashioning stone, and how they fit into the world's history." Recent patches also added racial bonuses for characters, including the Cyclops' natural resistance to cold and innate bonuses versus of reptilian creatures. Any more races planned, Travis? "We definitely would like to have more races coming down the line…but a new character class is first on the list!"

> "We've continually received requests for these features, and I think it allows people an easier transition from games like World of Warcraft."
>
> — Travis Baldree, lead programmer, Flagship Studios Seattle

Extensive crafting trees have entered Mythos, and we're happy to report that the system is based on point investment and questlines across Uld, not endless ingredient grinding. With new socketable gear called Heraldries, players can enchant items with some hefty bonus stats. You'll probably want to stash your best gear in the bank before entering Mythos' new PvP zones, however; victorious players can loot a random item from their hapless victims.

Other recent Mythos upgrades include an in-game mail system, core stat bonuses for skill investments, group effect potions, better experience gain for parties, and thicker monster density in dungeons. Interestingly, Mythos has also added entirely new camera and control options, transforming the game from a strictly Diablo-style isometric clickfest to a more MMO-like feature set, with camera pitch and WASD movement controls. "We've continually received requests for these features, and I think it allows people an easier transition from games like World of Warcraft," said Baldree of the new options.

Download this: D.I.P.R.I.P.

Crafted within the highly adaptable Source engine by a team of 15 in Szczecin, Poland, the aggressively acronymic D.I.P.R.I.P. (Die in Pain, Rest in Peace) is an upcoming vehicular combat game in the vein of Vigilante 8. D.I.P.R.I.P.'s large post-apocalyptic environments are surprisingly polished, physics feel good, and weapon effects are strong. Try the PC demo at www.diprip.com. A small publisher would do well to sign this future gem for XBL and PSN release. D.I.P.R.I.P. is currently migrating to Orange Box code, so it's only going to get better.

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TOEI ANIMATION

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ORIGIN Spirits of the Past

It's not easy being green

words Bill Gray

You may want to think twice before biting into that apple, or enjoying that pear, or savoring that strawberry. They could be genetically modified plants, and according to Funimation's newest movie release, *Origin: Spirits of the Past*, these types of plants will eventually be responsible for the near-extinction of mankind, thanks to an out-of-control genetic engineering experiment on the moon. These "super-trees" literally split the moon into three pieces, then burst on over to Earth, wrecking cities with their impact and forcing mankind to live on the fringes of their Forest, drinking whatever water the plants and their caretakers decide to leave them.

When Agito, a boy from Neutral City, delves too deep while exploring subterranean water caves, he accidentally awakens Toola, a young girl, from a 300-year cryogenically-assisted sleep. Their chance meeting sets off a chain of events threatening not only Neutral City, but the Forest itself; Ragna, a military state dedicated to making war upon the Forest; and perhaps even the entire world.

GONZO, the animation studio responsible for so many beautifully animated anime series (think *Trinity Blood* if you're an anime fan), has outdone itself with Origin. All of the movie's details, from the funky, post-apocalyptic clothes, to the tremendous vistas of ruined buildings covered with trees, to the mechanized tanks of Ragna, add up to animation that is relentlessly creative and fascinating to watch. The studio strikes a perfect balance between CGI and traditional animation techniques, something that has been inconsistent with other GONZO titles.

Sadly for *Origin*, movies have to be judged not just on how they look, but on how they tell their story, and what they're actually saying. And it's here that things start to break down. There's just so fracking much going on, that following the action of the movie is difficult, and connecting with its characters is nigh-impossible. I can't help but think Origin's would have been better as a full 24-episode series given its frenetic pace and esoteric story. Also, its heavy-handed ecological message may turn off viewers (like me) who can take their eyes off of the admittedly breathtaking animation and actually pay attention to what the film is saying. Still, its marvelous set pieces, evocative music, and fascinating concept more than compensate for a little sermonizing, and thanks to *Origin* we can all be a little more leery of genetically modified fruits and vegetables.

Origin: Spirits of the Past Two-Disc Special Edition

Verdict: A film that, animation-wise at least, gives Studio Ghibli a run for its money. GONZO has a ways to go, though, in figuring out how to create memorable characters and tell a succinct story in 90 minutes.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	90 minutes, 50 minute "Making Of" doc
Episodes	1
Rating	TV-PG
Available	March

fantasy LIFE

mabinogi

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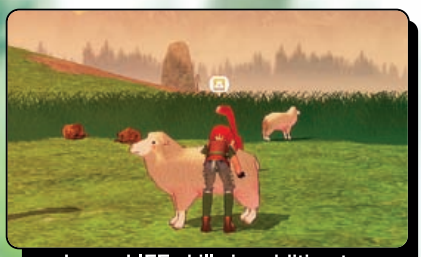

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xxxHolic

Become an xxxHolic

I knew the moment I breached the cover of the *xxxHolic* manga that Clamp had done it again. I've been captivated by two of their previous works, *Magic Knight Rayearth* and *X/1999*, but *xxxHolic* may be their best yet. The story follows the weird world of Kimihiro Watanuki, a high school student who's gone through life bearing a curse that's rendered him a magnet for wayward spirits—huge globs of disgusting apparitions that only he can see, making the simple act of walking down the street a total nightmare—until he finds himself in front of a peculiar looking shop sandwiched between towering skyscrapers. Drawn inside he's greeted by two strange little girls who introduce him to their even stranger master, Yuko Ichihara—an elegant, beautiful witch who has the power to grant any wish. In exchange for Watanuki's services, cooking, cleaning, and doing odd jobs, she agrees to exorcise his demons, and before you know it she's almost as bad as all those old ghosts. You'd expect a character like Yuko to exude all of the stereotypical qualities that define a powerful witch, but she's actually a bit of nut, which is both refreshing and amusing. It isn't long before the girl Watanuki worships (to put it lightly) along with his school rival enter the picture and begin accompanying Yuko on her many strange encounters.

The mood and look of *xxxHolic* are equally original; the characters are wonderfully gangling and the color palette shifts dramatically with the series schizophrenic pulse, jumping from bright and humorous to dark and foreboding. What perfect timing too, with Witchblade about to end. I already have another box to fill. **Dave Halverson**

xxxHolic

Verdict: The best of both worlds as it applies to Clamp: Classic long limbed characters and Gothic themes rub elbows with hyper exaggerated visages and plucky humor.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	NA
Rating	TV-PG
Available	Now

Hell Girl

Family Ties

Familial relations are the theme as Ai Enma, aka *Hell Girl*, continues to serve up her own piping hot brand of justice—taking a jealous twin, a baby killer, and a sister-murder straight to the fiery pit in volume four of *Hell Girl*. But journalist Hajime Shibata and his daughter Tsugumi are closing in, almost managing to convince several of Ai's "clients" not to enter into Ai's grim bargain. The mystery as to Ai's motivations, her past, and her connection to the Shibatas begins to unravel, and this series, slow to heat up, is really starting to boil. **Bill Gray**

Hell Girl

Verdict: Hell Girl's much like witnessing a car accident you fear to watch but can't look away. The series has begun to transcend the formula of previous volumes, making it all the more compelling.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	4
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	NA
Rating	TV-MA
Available	Now

WitchBlade Vol. 5

This can't end well

As we approach the final volume of *Witchblade,* every aspect of the story is coming unraveled. Wado resorts to extreme measures and finally forces Takiyama out of Dohji Industries, creating a monster in the process—out of his bumbling assistant no less— that forces Masane to push the Witchblade to the next dangerous level. Elsewhere Furimizu's prodigal granddaughter Maria murders him in cold blood and takes over the NSWF (so much for being born again). A ray of hope attempts to beam in as Takiyama and Masane explore the potential for a relationship however, things end bad when Masane is forced to transform in front of Rihoko (who we now know to be Takiyama's daughter as well as the original target of the Witchblade). Then just when you don't think things can get any worse, it becomes apparent that Masane is probably dying. Unless you're following the series none of that means squat, in which case maybe it's time you checked it out. **Dave Halverson**

WitchBlade Vol. 5

Verdict: I still miss the detail Gonzo put into the 1st volume but the story continues to deliver. There's so much more to Witchblade than meets the eye.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	5
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	NA
Rating	TV-MA
Available	March

THE POTTY STARTS HERE!

Shinchan

SEASON ONE PART 1

OWN THE DVD MAY 13TH

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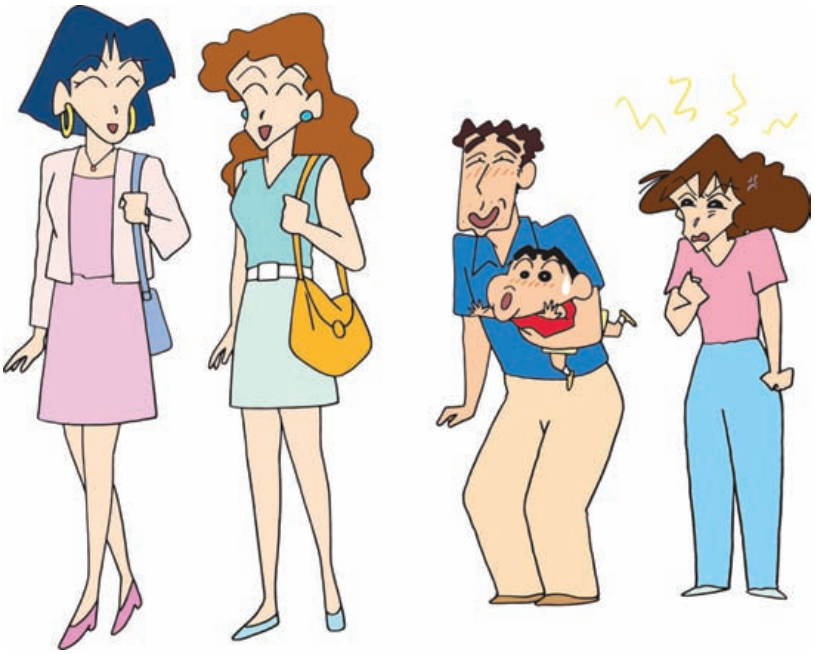
As seen on ADULT SWIM™

Shin-chan

He's no Charlie Brown



"awesome. I can't wait to poop that." Ah, Shin-chan. Is there nothing you won't say or do to get a laugh? From its artwork to its potty humor, *Shin-chan* is crude in every sense of the world. The show has been delighting Japanese audiences for *years* with its ridiculously over-the-top jokes, bizarre characters and rare sweet moments. Now, thanks to some snappy rewrites from Funimation's crack translation team, we finally get to see how a butt-wiggling, loud-mouthed kid managed to captivate audiences worldwide. And though it's not perfect, *Shin-chan* is quite possibly the most outrageous, irreverent and hilarious cartoon to come out of Japan.

A cross between *South Park* and *Peanuts*, *Shin-chan* loosely traces the mis-adventures of a small boy, Shinnosuke Nohara, his seriously dysfunctional family, his classmates at school, and his neighbors and relatives. Episodes are short, self-contained, and packed with gross-out humor, crass double-entendre, puns, cultural references, and the occasional slapstick moment as well. They usually center on day-to-day events, such as going on a pee strike to force his mom to raise his allowance, or a day at Super Fun Time Happy American School! Be careful though, as watching too many episodes in a row can be hazardous to your IQ. Sometimes I could actually feel myself getting dumber as I watched them—though I certainly enjoyed the slide. **Bill Gray**

"Watching too many episodes in a row can be hazardous to your IQ."

Shin-chan

Verdict: *South Park* before *South Park* existed. Easily one of the funniest, and most accessible, cartoons to come out of Japan, thanks to Funimation's spiffy re-writing and dubbing.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	22 minutes per episode
Episodes	13
Rating	TV-MA
Available	May 13

The Clamp Double Feature:
Tsubasa/xxxHolic Movies

Double trouble

Anyone not familiar with the premise behind *xxxHolic* and especially Tsubasa will undoubtedly find this Clamp Double Feature a lot like walking into a movie halfway through so if you're so inclined you may want to hit Google before you press the play button. Of the two features, each a snapshot within the overall context of their respective universes, the *xxxHolic* vignette, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—a sort of whodunit mixed together with gothic horror—is the darker and more straightforward of the two, in contrast to the Miyazaki-like events of the *Princess in the Birdcage Kingdom*, a beautifully animated story within Tsubasa's epic framework, about an evil king who betrays his people for power, in a world within a giant birdcage where every person is linked to a bird. Sounds weird I know, but the last 10 minutes alone are worth the price of admission. **Dave Halverson**

"the xxxHolic vignette, A Midsummer Night's Dream, is the darker and more straightforward of the two..."

The Clamp Double Feature: Tsubasa/xxxHolic Movies

Verdict: Requisite viewing for fans with high enough production values to recruit new ones.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	NA
Running Time	82 minutes (movies) 120 mins (extras)
Episodes	2 movies
Rating	TV-PG
Available	Now

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Best-Of 2007

We reviewed 100s of books over the course of two months to arrive at the lists below, which we decided to present in no specific order given the subjective nature of such a varied collection of reading and viewing material. In a world dominated by digital entertainment it's good to know that you still pick up a good book...every night for the next year.

compiled by Dave Halverson and Bill Gray

Best 10 Manga of 2007

Witchblade Takeru Manga

Top Cow/Bandai Ent. /// Script by Yasuko Kobayashi ///
Written & illustrated by Kazasa Sumita /// Sci-Fi/Action 16 & Up

Never before has an American comic seen this level of esteem in Japan. The original manga series is simply stunning in every respect, joining the anime in making Witchblade a household name.

Purgatory Kabuki

DrMaster Books /// Story & art by Yasushi Suzuki ///
Fantasy/Action 15 & Up

The artist behind such epic Treasure games as Sin & Punishment and Ikaruga takes us on a journey from the underworld to the heavens via one of the most beautifully illustrated manga ever created.

Zombie Loan

Yen Press /// Produced by Peach-Pit/Square Enix:
Banri Sendou Shibuko Ebara /// Horror/Comedy 16 & Up

On death's door? Too young to die? You need a Zombie Loan! This is storytelling on a level that only Peach Pit and Square Enix can deliver and by far the freshest zombie tale since the first hand popped through the dirt.

Hideyuki Kikuchi's Vampire Hunter D

Digital Manga Publishing /// Adapted & illustrated
by Saiko Takaki /// Sci-Fi/Horror 16 & Up

The manga adaptation of the Vampire Hunter D novel series from acclaimed horror writer Hideyuki Kikuchi with bone chilling illustrations from Saiko Takaki. Come meet the Nobility.

MPD Psycho

Dark Horse /// Story: Eiji Otsuka ///
Art: Sho-u Tajima /// Horror 18 & Up

Startling, complex, and exceptionally brutal, MPD Psycho is as brilliant as it is bloody. Major kudos to Dark Horse for bringing this stateside uncut—this one would lose much of its power were it muzzled with editing.

Gunsmith Cats: Burst

Dark Horse /// Story & art by Kenichi Sonoda ///
Action/Crime 18 & Up

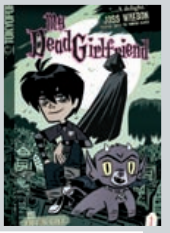
Firearms expert and bounty hunter Rally Vincent and her bombshell partner Misty May return in GS Burst, a sequel to the original Gunsmith Cats. Guns, explosives, fast cars—what more could you ask for in a manga?

Disgaea 2

Broccoli Books /// Story by Hekaton ///
Art by Hekaton /// Action/Comedy 13 & Up

Laharl and Etna take a backseat in this (mostly) faithful adaptation of Disgaea 2 for the PS2. Replete with slapstick and bizarre humor, you needn't have played the game to enjoy the book—but it helps.

My Dead Girlfriend



TokyoPop /// Story & art by Eric Wight ///
Comedy/Fantasy 13 & Up

Finney Bleaks family members are ghosts, his school is filled with monsters and he's a social outcast… until he hooks up with the love of his life Jenny Smart. Too bad she's dead.

King City

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Brandon Graham ///
Sci-Fi/Comedy 16 & Up

Look deep enough into the bowels of King City (beyond the old Sasquatch and endless string of vending machines) and you might find Joe and his cat that can transform into anything. All you'll want is more.

The Dark Goodbye

TokyoPop /// Written by Frank Marraffino ///
Art by Drew Rausch /// Horror/Mystery 16 & Up

The bizarre horror noir world of Max "Mutt" Mason is filled with femme fatale's and things that go bump in the night, right before they try to kill you. This place makes Sin City look like a day care center.

Very Honorable Mention

Archlord

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Jin-Hwan Park ///
Action/Fantasy 13 & Up

A manwha based on a videogame—but it's actually good. Archlord's well-crafted, straight-from-the-hip, and intricately detailed swords-and-sorcery action doesn't dazzle, but is surprisingly satisfying.

Sgt. Frog 1-3

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Mine Yoshizaki ///
Comedy 13 & Up

The first three volumes of Sgt. Frog in one two-inch thick volume. Hey; Alien frogs are taking over the world. Don't you think you should know about it?

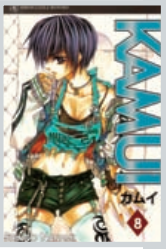
Best 10 Manga Series Continued from 2006

Kamiyadori

Top Cow/Bandai Ent. /// Story & art by Kei Sanbe /// Action 16 & Up

A virus called the Kamiyadori is turning people into monsters. It's up to a special peace keeping force called the Right Arms to put down the infected… They walk a delicate line. This a gorgeous manga in every respect.

Kamui



Broccoli Books /// Story & art by Shingo Nanami /// Action Fantasy 13 & Up

The pinnacle of character design and exquisite art lives at the core of Kamui making the story—a spiritual sci-fi epic on a grand scale—resonate with the kind of emotion seldom captured in book form.

Eden: It's an Endless World!

Dark Horse /// Story & art by Hiroaki Endo /// Sci-Fi 18 & Up

On the surface a sci-fi manga, Eden's heart and soul is its uncompromising and unblinking observation of man's inhumanity to man. Don't worry, though—there's plenty of action and a complex rollercoaster of a plot to go with all the philosophy.

Lara Croft Tomb Raider Tankobon

Bandai Entertainment /// Story & art by Top Cow Prod. /// Action/Adventure 13 & Up

The entire collection of Top Cow color comics collected in 200 plus page manga editions. The color to black & white transfer makes for some dark pages but these adventures and this artwork are as priceless as any treasure.

Utopias Avenger

TokyoPop /// Story & Art by Oh Se-Kwon /// Action 13 & Up

You will not find a more detailed and utterly beautiful—but oh so brutal—manga. Sci-fi, fantasy, and supernatural martial arts explode on every page. If you read one manga this year…

Blazin' Barrels

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Min-Seo Park /// Action/Comedy 10 & Up

Action packed no holds barred action and comedy in the neo-wild wild west. Join Sting and the all girl gang of Gold Romany while you can. They're already on volume 10!

Tokyo Tribes

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Santa Inoue /// Action/Drama 16 & Up

Urban decay never looked so good. Hardcore hip-hop infused down and dirty inner city warfare on a biblical scale. The GTA of the manga world.

Last Fantasy

TokyoPop /// Story by Creative Hon /// Art by Yan-Wong Kwan /// Fantasy 13 & Up

Manga's one and only send up of the RPG is worth the weight of the first 5 volumes in gold. Fake RPG gold that is. Last fantasy is too cool. You don't have the HP to put it down!

MBQ

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Felipe Smith /// Action/Comedy 16 & Up

The 3 volume MBQ wrapped up this year but that's no reason not to pick it up and see just how far Felipe Smith is willing to go in his over the top portrayal of the mad-mad L.A. underbelly. Over the top doesn't begin to describe it.

Basilisk

Del Rey /// Original Story by Futaro Yamada /// Manga by Masaki Segawa /// Action/Drama 18 & Up

The age old story of the war between the Iga and Kouga clans sends ten ninja from each clan into mortal combat leaving star crossed lovers Oboro and Gennosuke to either bring peace or fight to the death. The anime was spectacular but this is the way to take in the story.

Very Honorable Mention

Grenadier

TokyoPop /// Story & art by Sousuke Kaise /// Action 16 & Up

Rushuna is on a quest journeying across a brutal landscape to find a past she can't remember. Don't let the fact that she's a golden haired beauty with double-Ds fool you. She's also number one with a gun to put it lightly.

Trinity Blood

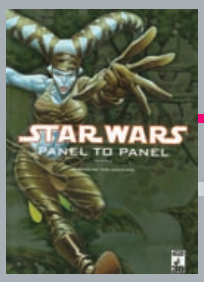
TokyoPop /// Story by Sunao Yoshida /// Art by Kiyo Kyujo /// Action 16 & Up

Post Armageddon life on Earth has spawned a perpetual war between humans and vampires, but this is no ordinary vampire tale. This comes straight from the Vatican. We're talkin super nun's and the most lethal priest on the planet.

Essential Art Books

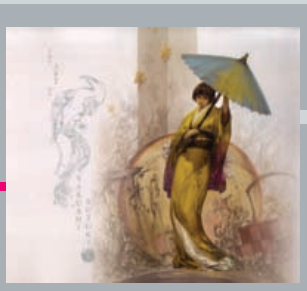
The Art of Simon Bisley: Redux

Metal Mammoth Inc.



Star Wars Panel to Panel Vol. 2

Dark Horse Books



The Art of Yasushi Suzuki

DrMaster

Honorable Mention:

Naruto & Death Note

Even though both series began prior to 2006 no manga list would be complete without mentioning Naruto and Death Note, Viz Media's manga juggernauts that continue to spawn anime, movie, and video game spin offs.

Best Fan Service / Sexy Time:

Sundome No. 1 Yen Press

A riotous coming of age story wrapped in a lethal package.

Gross Out/Comedy/Most Likely to Succeed Award:

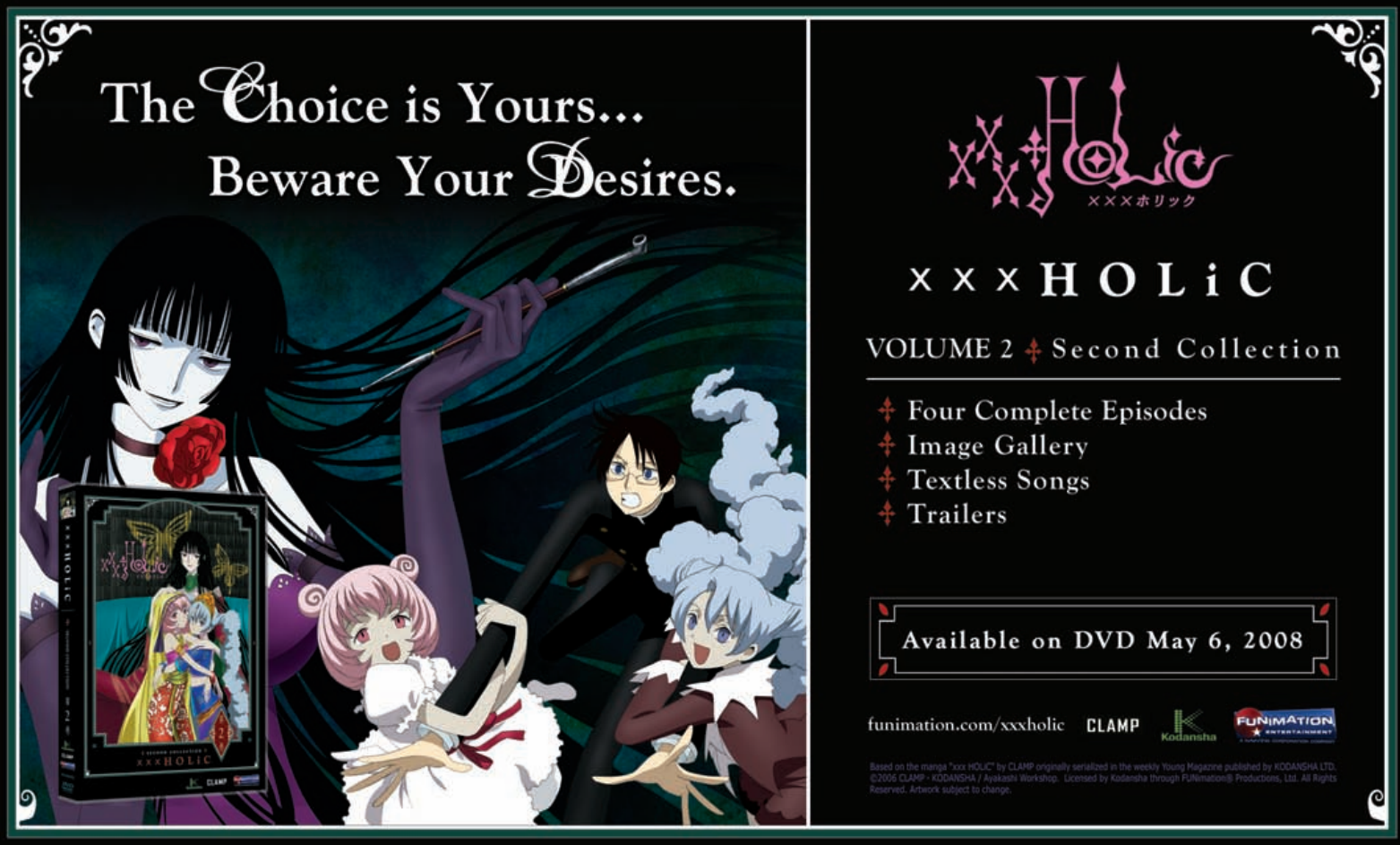
I Luv Halloween TokyoPop

These kids are the trick, their neighbors may be the treat. There's nothing on the planet like I Luv Halloween. It crosses the line, erases it, draws another, crosses that, then turns around and pees on it.

And the so wrong that it's right/best superhero award goes to...

Empowered Dark Horse /// by Adam Warren

When she's not tied up, shacking up with her thug boyfriend, or hanging out with her homegirl Ninjette, Empowered kinda sorta fights crime as the low girl on the Super Homie totem pole.



Best 10 Graphic Novels of 2007

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Long Way Home

Dark Horse /// Written by Joss Whedon ///
Art by Georges Jeanty

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

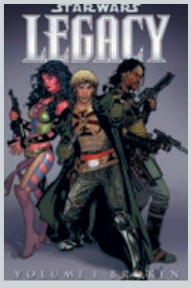
Dark Horse /// Script by John Jackson Miller ///
Art by Dustin Weaver and Brian Ching

Artemis Fowl

Hyperion Books /// Adapted by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin ///
Art by Giovanni Rigano

Star Wars: Legacy

Dark Horse /// Script by John Ostrander ///
Art by Jan Duursema



Star Wars: Dark Times

Dark Horse /// Story by Welles Hartley ///
Script by Mick Harrison /// Art by Douglas Wheatley

The Darkness: Depths of Hell

Top Cow Prod. Inc /// Created by Marc Silvestri, Garth Ennis, and David Wohl /// Written by David Lapham ///
Art by Brian Denham

Ghost in the Shell: Human-Error Processor

Dark Horse /// Story & art by Shirow Masamune

The Promethean Challenge: Appleseed

Dark Horse /// Story & art by Shirow Masamune

Doug TenNapel's Gear

Image /// Story & art by Doug TenNapel

Death Jr.

Image /// Written by Gary Whitta ///
Illustrated by Ted Naifeh

Very Honorable Mention

Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse

IDW Publishing /// Story & art by Ben Templesmith

Dungeon Parade Vol. 1

Nantier-Beall-Minoustchine Publishing Inc. ///
by Joanne Sear, Lewis Trondheim & Manu Larcenet

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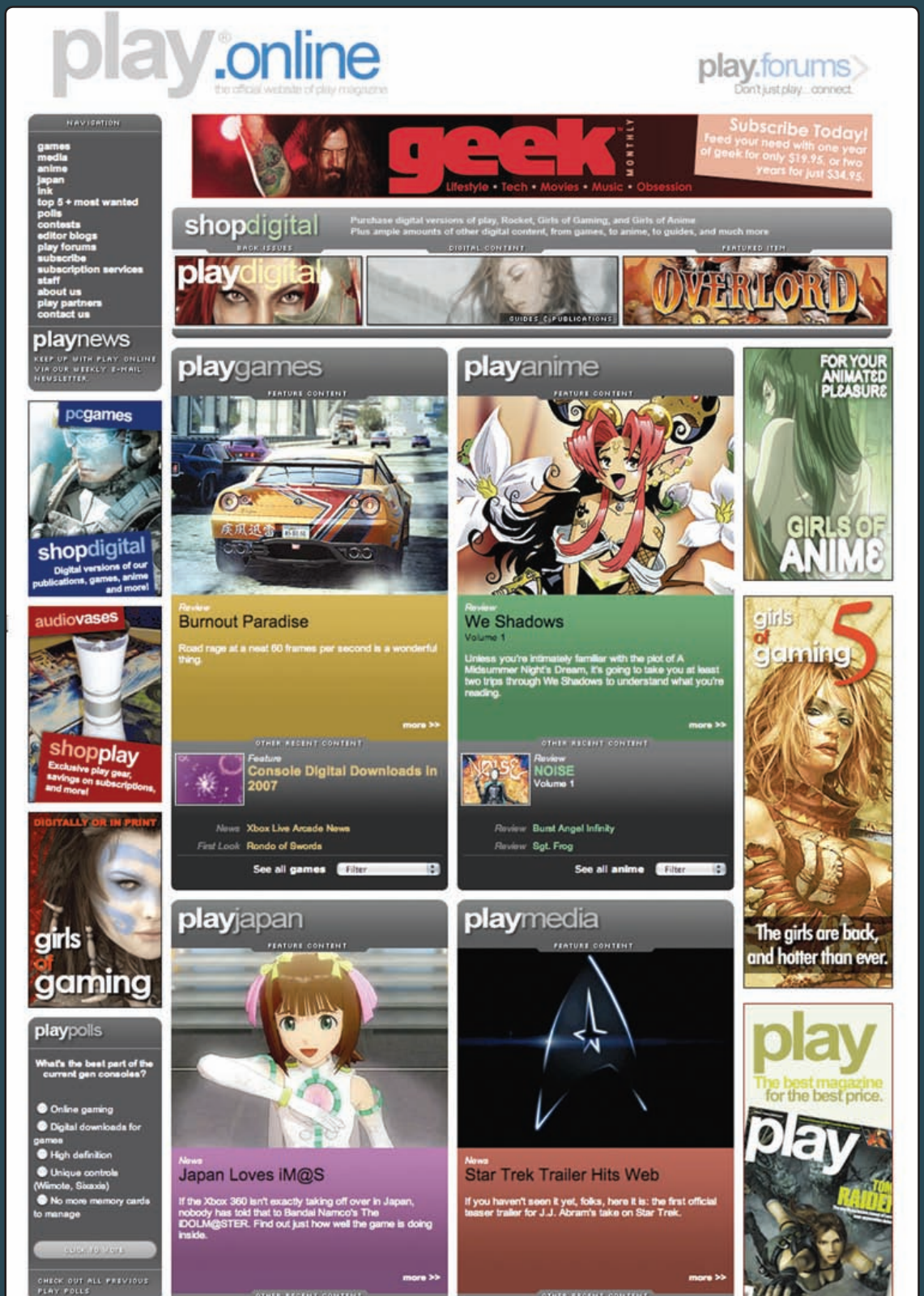

Cloverfield

Movie: B

Directed by: Matt Reeves
Starring: Michael Stahl-David, Mike Vogel
Released By: Paramount
Rated: PG13

Cloverfield is a very expensive *project*, a conceptually interesting film that falters a little on delivery. Rumor has it that J.J. Abrams was in the Godzilla aisle at a Japanese toy-store and asked himself, "Why doesn't America have a national monster?" Then, he made one. Problem is, the Cloverfield monster isn't iconic enough. The design doesn't look like anything, doesn't have the lion-mouth of Godzilla, or the apish familiarity of King Kong.

To make this film something more compelling than *Independence Day*, Abrams' team told it from the handi-cam POV of our hero's best friend, Hud. (Was this a nod to gaming, or just a coincidence?) For a film that's supposed to be a real-life, *what-if* take on a giant monster, it's a shame that the script is so clunky. I know that if I was in a pitch-black tunnel, running from an alien, I wouldn't be cracking so many glib jokes.

More moments of silence, fear, and "I-can't-believe-this-is-happening," might have made it all better. Let's see what they do in the sequel.

PS. The Cloverfield theme (that's the music over the credits) is GREAT. *HC*

Juno

Movie: B+

Directed by: Jason Reitman
Starring: Ellen Page, Michael Cera
Released By: Fox
Rated: R

The terrifically talented Ellen Page is destined for indie stardom, but before there's ever the chance to tire of this young girl's sticky sweet charisma, watch this Oscar-nominated performance and delight in its pitch-perfect charm. The story, about a teenage girl dealing with an unwanted pregnancy and the decision to give it up for adoption, is atypically true and warm, even when the dialogue gets too hip for its own good. Page is at the center, adding a sassy snap to every last line of dialogue. Juno is a fun ticket for giant laughs, but what makes the film more than the expected is a cast of characters who everyone can relate to in some subtle way. Make room for the syrupy soundtrack and too-clean ending and you have a special little film in Juno. *BF*

Aliens vs Predator: Requiem

Movie: D

Director by: Brothers Strause
Starring: Steven Pasquale, Reiko Aylesworth
Released By: Fox
Rated: R

Let me qualify my mild disdain for Aliens vs Predator: Requiem by sheepishly stating I kind of liked Aliens vs Predator, which in plenty of ways is just as much a misfire as this hacking apart of everything that made the original Aliens and Predator movies tick. To its credit, Aliens vs. Predator Requiem ruthlessly kills off nearly every character you might not expect to be killed off, and it tries really hard at the end to take a shot at the mean government and actually have something to say. And remember, it's sometimes the effort that counts! But in Requiem, a little more effort would have gone a long way, rather than limply ripping off so many horror and action and Alien conventions and blending them into a murky mess of a film. In the opening, there's a great shot of a ship, and a good laugh can be had when the film tries its hand at T&A, and it's always fun to see Aliens beating up Predators and vice versa—at least it was once. No more please. *BF*

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EDITOR

Disappointment in Digital Form

I made a mistake concerning this generation of video game consoles. I had been under the impression that the ability to jump online and play against friends (or foul-mouthed strangers) was going to be the crowning jewel of this current crop of hardware. While my love of online gaming hasn't changed or softened, I've started to realize that there is something even more potentially important slowly building: digital distribution.

What for now may seem like a small, quaint game-purchasing alternative has the power and possibility to change everything... that is, if companies are willing to honestly embrace and support the idea. Worries like production of physical copies and the fight for shelf space are tossed aside, with each and every game having the chance to exist on an equal playing field. That's not even to mention other benefits, such as the revival of long-inactive systems and the games on them we missed the first time around.

What lies before us is an endless horizon, free of the limits and pressures that restrict the current market for many games. Though it may sound like the perfect situation for the future of gaming, things unfortunately aren't quite where they need to be just yet. I certainly appreciate the progress that has been made, and obviously can't fully comprehend the positions of Nintendo, Sony or Microsoft in regards to how they run their digital stores and why.

That said, allow me to temporarily step out of my shoes as an editor, and speak from the perspective of what I truly am–a consumer–and what I'd like to see in that respect.

Point #1: The mistake of "Quality over Quantity"

It's a constant battle cry: "quality over quantity!" Instead of just flooding these services with games, what is important is that we seek and find the cream of the crop, those titles that really shine and bring something to the service that isn't currently there.

The problem is, that idea goes completely against the principles of digital distribution. When there's no physical stock to carry or worry over how many discs to press, quality and quantity not only *can* go hand in hand, but *must*. A perfect example of this is the iTunes Store. Apple's 21st-century record shop has become the #2 music retailer period, digital or otherwise. The iTunes Store reached this position not by artificially limiting the amount or type of music that is made available, but by carrying anything and everything no matter how popular or "retail friendly" it may be. When you have no limit on how much product you can carry, why limit yourself?

Speaking of limits...

Point #2: Don't decide what I do and don't want

...what I want, and what somebody else wants me to want, are often very different. On the retail side, I completely understand why a console's parent company would want to have at least some level of control over what games represent their hardware in stores across the country. With limited shelf space, if those shelves are filled by titles with little to no mass-market appeal, it can weaken the attraction of that console to potential customers.

Move to the digital side, and I no longer feel bad for being selfish. With a theoretically limitless amount of storage space with which to sell digital games, I don't want to be told which products do or do not fit the profile of a particular download service. Again, looking at the iTunes Store, Apple isn't in the business of arbitrarily deciding what music is or isn't "an iTunes-type of song." They're in the business of selling music and bringing in customers, and what does that best is having as extensive and diverse a library of music as possible. If a company wants to get their music up in the iTunes Store, Apple is there to make that happen, and that's that.

Some of my favorite games on the various digital services are ones that many have written off as a waste of space. But if I *want* to buy games like that, and some company somewhere *wants* to sell them to me, isn't that enough reason for them to be treated the same as a Bionic Commando Rearmed or LittleBig Planet?

To put it bluntly... I don't care what the people in charge want in these stores, or what they think I want; all I care about is what I want. As long as somebody is willing to make it, and somebody somewhere is willing to buy it, it should be up for sale; provided, of course, the game doesn't have quality control issues, or contain subject matter that is obviously inappropriate.

> "The Family Entertainment Protection Act died in Congress in 2005. Had it passed, it would have put the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) under federal mandate."

So, to Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft: please don't limit the potential of your services by making decisions concerning what types of games are or aren't fitting for your consumer base. Let us decide that. A service for selling entertainment content is at its best when the most amount of people possible can find the most amount of content that they want to purchase possible.

Point #3: Effort, effort, effort

I'm worried about this being a bit of the old "looking a gift horse in the mouth," but the potential of digital sales is limitless, held back only by the amount of effort a company is willing to put into their, well, efforts. One of the most exciting uses of digital distribution is in going back and releasing those games that never made it to America for a particular platform. Think about all of the great Japanese-only PS1 titles we could get, or those original Xbox games that were released in other countries but never here. There's a lot that can be done, but I'm afraid not enough companies will be willing to take the chance on putting forth the effort to do so.

In one way, we're getting a taste of this via the "import" category on the Virtual Console, and I'm more than trilled about that fact. Unfortunately, simply releasing these games untranslated just isn't the answer. Some games–such as the recently released Puyo Puyo 2 for Genesis–lose a lot of their charm or value when left in a language most of their potential audience cannot understand, while other titles desperately needing a North American debut simply can't come out over here without a full English translation. (I'm looking at you, Monster World IV.) I understand all of the arguments that can be made about what it would take to translate a game versus its potential for profit, but you can't blame me for dreaming.

Oh, and before I completely run out of room...

From Nintendo, I want more internal memory, so that my Virtual Console-filled Wii can even download WiiWare games in the first place. From Sony, I want demos for every PSN game, day one, no exceptions. And from Microsoft, a D-pad that understands the meaning of up, down, left, and right.

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